42nd Anniversary Issue

240 PAGES

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCT/NOV

$3.95 US • CANADA $4.50 • UK £2.95

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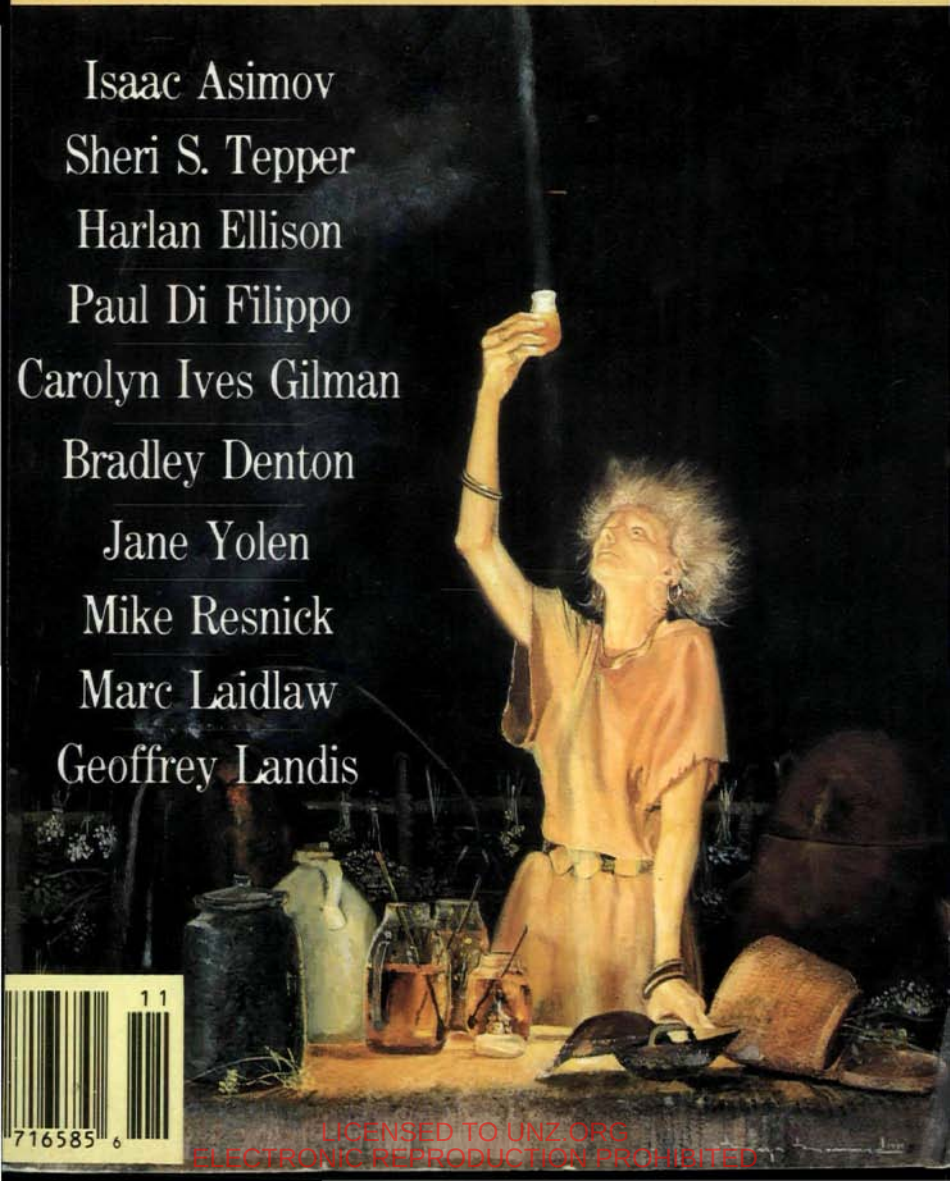

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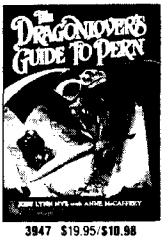

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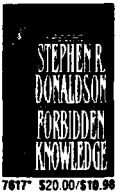

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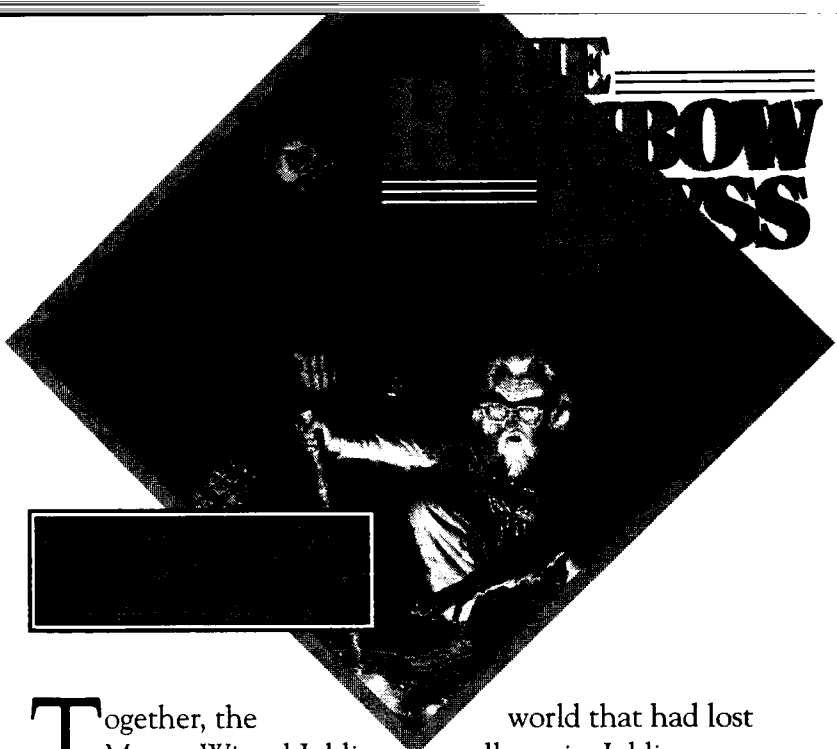

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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COVER BY BRYN BARNARD FOR "THE HONEYCRAFTERS"

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 81, No. 4-5, Whole No. 484-85, Oct./Nov. 1991. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.50 per copy. Annual subscription $26.00; $31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, CT 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, CT 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1991 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

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Dark Fantasy Just Took A Quirky New

Here are the opening paragraphs from five of the stories in **SEXPUNKS And Savage Sagas....**

The AIDS Giver

Michael knew what he had. And when the breathing got heavy, he took it out and showed them: A blood test certifying him **HIV Negative**. The recently dated Fairfield Medical Center receipt made him a safe ship in a paranoid sea, and women begged to be taken aboard.

Of course, there was no Fairfield Medical Center and Michael Mulvina was as HIV Positive as the Pope was Catholic. The first thing he did each Monday morning was type out a new receipt.

Michael called himself "The AIDS Giver."

He had gotten the disease from a woman, so there was a little gender karma to be settled.

Buy American, Or Else

Axe in hand, he stood facing the new Mercedes 500SL. Glancing both ways to make sure he was alone on the third floor of the parking garage, he pushed the stop watch on his Timex and grasped the axe handle with both hands. Smiling, he raised the axe in the air. Sweat beaded his forehead, his eye twitched, and his heart hammered. He tensed his shoulders, teetered momentarily, then drove the axe down like an executioner dispatching a condemned man.

The mirrored metal surface crumpled with a screech-groan-snap that released the bowed hood and set off a squawking alarm. He silenced it by chopping the battery cable in half. The next blow took out the grill; pieces clattered to the pavement like broken teeth. A headlight and the right front fender were next to go. It took six seconds to blast the windshield and lower the boom on the roof and driver's door.

Eighteen seconds. Amen.

His breath coming in quick shallow gasps, he stepped back to observe his work. Satisfied, he withdrew a small card from his shirt pocket and tossed it into the front seat.

Traitor:
By purchasing a foreign car, you financed alien powers who used the money to buy up our country. Next time, buy American.

The Groupie

Ashley was addicted—not to the singers who headlined the shows but to the Silver Eagle touring buses and the on-the-road lifestyle. She lived for the rhythm of the road—she needed it to sleep. And the smell of diesel in the back bedroom, offensive to many, was to her a seductive perfume.

Hair

Benjamin Barton opened his eyes to find one of his wife's eyebrows filling his field of vision. Ellen snored peacefully on her pillow, six inches from his face. He studied the unruly hairs growing this way and that and decided hair was disgusting. It wasn't a quirky idea that evolved out of a traumatic experience, but a simple fact that for 38 years he had somehow failed to recognize. Until now.

He got up and slogged to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, he ran his fingers through his hair. It was revolting. He did the best he could with scissors, but his dome ended up looking like a basketball with stubble. Then he lathered up and shaved what was left. His eyebrows and armpits were next. Clipping off his eyelashes proved difficult and time consuming. He was sitting on the toilet seat shaving his testicles when his wife walked into the bathroom and screamed.

That's how it started.

Dildo Nights

Wet T-shirt contests packed the Palace Bar for two years before the patrons got tired of looking at the same drippy titties. Female mud wrestling followed. It was hot for a year before the crowds started to thin.

Drew Digby spent a month of Sundays brainstorming new marketing ideas. He needed a real dick lifter—something hot enough to attract every cowboy, construction worker and horny student with a fake ID in the Phoenix Valley.

"Dildo nights!"

"Dildo nights?" said Brenda, co-owner of the Palace.

"We'll offer a cash prize to the woman with the greatest capacity."

Brenda brushed long strands of red hair out of her eyes and looked at Frank with her mouth open. "They'd bust us for that."

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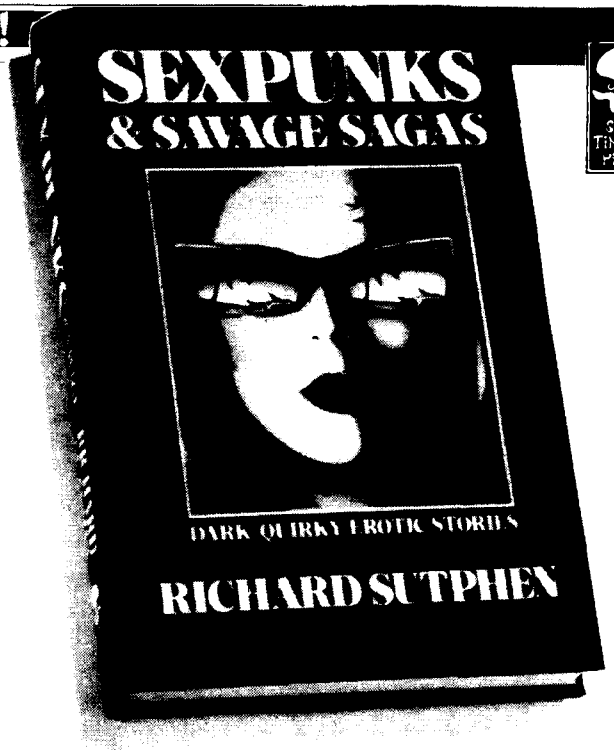
Twist!



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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

ANNIVERSARIES. WE celebrate them good and bad. For the World War II generation-Americans, the day that shall live in infamy is Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941. For some, October 4, 1957 — the day of the Sputnik launch. For others, November 22, 1963 or April 4, 1968, or June 3, 1968 — assassination dates all, of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy. Turning points. The ends of eras or the beginnings of new ones.

As I write this in late May, I have just celebrated my fifth year with my partner, and am facing the celebration of the completion of my thirty-first year on this planet. Good occasions, both: the birthday marking the beginning of my existence — and the anniversary, the beginning of my happiness.

But anniversaries are more than an excuse to celebrate or remember. They are also markers — ways of keeping track of time. Our anniversaries will fade someday. My great-grandparents' generation discussed where they were when they discovered that Lincoln was dead. My grandmother told about seeing her first automobile. My mother hearing the first, frightening broadcast of Orson Welles's radio play, *War of the Worlds* — so well done that the entire nation thought itself invaded by Martians.

Harry Truman was president when the first issue of this magazine appeared. Soldiers had come home, displacing the women who had replaced them in the workforce. Building was booming. Fear of communism was endemic — yet McCarthyism hadn't quite reared its ugly head. Paperback books had yet to make a significant dent on the market. Most fiction appeared in magazines or between hard covers. The movie industry was fighting on the home front against an invader called television.

Today another terse, plain-spoken man holds the White House. Soldiers are returning home, but housing starts are down. Women have found their own place in the workforce. Fear of communism remains, buried under the confusion

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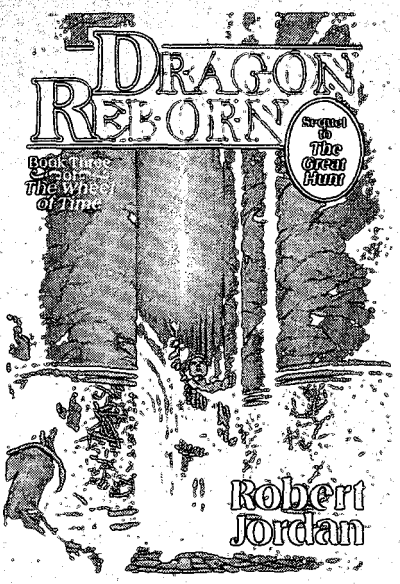

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of a changing Soviet Union — which just this spring changed the word "socialist" in U.S.S.R. to "sovereign." Paperback books cost more than hardcovers did forty-two years ago — and sell ten times more. Most magazines carry nonfiction instead of fiction. And the movie industry has fought and won (I think) a battle against its latest box office usurper, the videocassette recorder.

Every year, F&SF celebrates its anniversary with a special issue. Sometimes the issue has carried more fiction than others. This year, we're trying an experiment. You hold in your hands a double issue, filled with stories about (not surprisingly) time. We are messing with time in more ways than one. This issue carries an October/November cover date. Your next issue will arrive eight weeks from now and be dated December. Don't worry. We're not becoming a bimonthly. We are just looking for the most efficient way to provide you with a mountain of good fiction.

And the fiction in here is good. Mike Resnick's "Winter Solstice" examines the way memory works. Bradley Denton follows with the same theme, only with a science fiction setting, in "Rerun Roy, Donna and the Freak." Our cover story, by Carolyn Ives Gilman, portrays a race against time, and Sheri S. Tepper shows in a sly, witty way, the manner in which time can win any race.

Memories, anniversaries, time travel to the future and the past. This issue is yet another marker in the passage of the years. A moment to reflect, to celebrate, and then to move forward, ever changing, ever growing, expecting the unexpected — and reveling in it.

You are about to turn the page into the beginning of F&SF's forty-third year of publishing. Enjoy.

MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS and editorial correspondence should be sent to Kristine Kathryn Rusch, PO Box 11526, Eugene, OR 97440. All other correspondence should be sent to the magazine's general office: 14 Jewell Street, Cornwall, CT 06753.

RESULTS OF COMPETITION 54 will appear in the December issue, on sale October 29.

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Carolyn Ives Gilman has sold a number of stunning short stories. The first went to the Writers of the Future; the most recent appeared in these pages last June. She lives in Moscow, a beautiful little town in the agricultural Palouse region of Northern Idaho — a setting a bit too rural to serve as the foundation for the following story. "The Honeycrafters" is a story about harvesting, however. But more than that — it is a tale about art, addiction, and beauty. It also examines the way the old faces the new — a fitting theme for the first story in an anniversary issue.

THE HONEYCRAFTERS

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

THE MOTHERHOLD OF Magwin Ghar had prospered for nine journeys, until the day Renata Oblin came out of the west.

The band of beeherders had come to the very brink of Dawn to begin their nectar quest. They were erecting their dome tents on a sparse meadow beside a swift, chalky blue meltwater river. The immobile sun hung low in the east; to the west the sunlight touched the tips of ice peaks under the dark bank of clouds that always hung at the edge of permanent night. Here they were at the beginning of things, where land was born from ice and night. Everything around them was young.

The children were playing with their enormous shadows, when they saw the stranger coming down the pathless slope of scree. They stood still

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to stare. She was dressed in barbarian leathers, and coming from the west, where only storm and glaciers dwelt. As word spread through the camp, people stepped from their tents to watch her approach. When she drew near, they saw what they had half-feared, half-hoped: a ceramic broodpot in a pouch strapped to her chest.

She raised an arm in greeting and called in a clear, strong voice, "Whose motherhold is this?"

"Magwin Ghar's," someone answered.

She dropped to one knee to touch the ground in thanks. When she rose, her eyes swept them all in. "I am Renata of Oblin Motherhold. Many whiles ago I journeyed into the Dawnlands to seek my future. I have found it. I bring you a new hive mother!"

She touched the broodpot at her breast, then looked around, exhilarated, as if she expected them all to cheer at her hero's deed. But the people's looks were grave and uncertain. Because of her, their lives were all about to change.

DUBICH RHUD had always known the day would come. Ever since he and Magwin Ghar had walked the marriage line together, it had been there, somewhere in the future: the day a challenger for the motherhold would come, and Magwin would have to face death. But he had never guessed how full of helpless rage he would feel.

His voice sounded eerily calm as he told her the news. They sat inside her tent with their favorite pillows drawn close together. The beeswax candles cast a soft light on the intricate patterns of the woven wall-rugs and the comfortable layers of carpet on the floor.

"I am not ready to die just yet," Magwin said grimly. She still had the look of the wrestler she once had been — strong neck; solid, muscular torso; stocky legs. But now her close-cropped hair was the color of granite, and her face was leathery from years in the sun.

"There cannot be two leaders in the same motherhold," Dubich said, fingering the long braids of his gray beard. "*Someone* is going to die. Unless you step aside."

"Ha!" was Magwin's response. She raised her arm, clenching her fist and staring at her bunched biceps. The skin was loose, mottled with age spots. But there was nothing old about the flash in her eyes.

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"Why not give way. Magwin?" Dubich said quietly. "It is the way of nature Youth should replace age."

"When age has nothing more to offer," Magwin said. "I built this motherhold. I know how to run it."

It was not what she had said nine journeys ago, when *she* had been the one challenging old Borsun Ghar for control of the motherhold. She had been a whirlwind then: a swift temper, a loud laugh, forthright and bold, with a tender side only Dubich and a few others knew about. Gods, he had been proud of her.

"So you will fight her?" Dubich said unwillingly.

Magwin reached out for his hand. There was a teasing twinkle in her eye. "Don't worry, old man. I still have some brain cells that are as good as new, you know."

She loved it — the challenge, the conflict. Once, Dubich had enjoyed watching her, advising from the shadows. But lately he'd lost his taste for battles. It had been so quiet, the last journey since their children had left for other motherholds. He had grown used to a maturer marriage and the slower rhythms of age. He did not want to lose it all. The stakes in this battle were just too high.

Someone shook the door rattle, and Magwin shouted, "Enter!" It was two of the master honeycrafters, come to get good seats for the confrontation everyone expected. Magwin welcomed them from her pillow, and Dubich rose to serve some hydromel in carved horn cups. Soon more arrived, and more, till the tent was crowded, and people began to collect outside, where they could hear through the tent sides.

When Renata Oblin entered the tent, Dubich was startled at how young she was—younger than their own daughter. Yet she stood at the entrance with a careless self-confidence. She was tall and agile, with a long braid of brown hair. An archer, Dubich thought, or a climber.

"You are welcome to my tent, wanderer," Magwin said formally.

Dubich held out a cup of hydromel. Renata shook her head and, in a supple movement of tanned limbs, settled down, legs crossed. Now everyone knew how the land lay. Renata would not accept hospitality from someone she intended to kill.

"What is that around your neck?" Magwin asked.

In answer, Renata placed the broodpot on the soft carpet, then opened it.

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People leaned forward to see. Slowly, a large insect crawled free of the pot, too young yet to fly. There were several indrawn breaths, for she was a larger mother bee than any in Magwin Ghar's hives; and stranger yet, she was a glossy black all over.

"That is a fine creature," Magwin said. Her voice was bland, but Dubich could hear the envy in it. It had been a long time since their own hives had had an infusion of new bee blood. A motherhold could not last long with puny, inbred bees. "How did you find her?"

"I left Oblin Motherhold a journeypiece ago," Renata said. "I had five companions, young women like me who had all reached the wander-age. They went to find new homes among other motherholds, but I was not content with that. I turned toward the land of Dawn. I set out to find a new hive mother and bring her back.

"The Dawnlands are wide and cold, and constant storms rage along the boundary where night begins. I traveled through unmapped new lands, along the edges of the glaciers. I lived among the rockfalls, eating lichen and beetles; the sun was only an orange ball on the horizon. I always looked for a nest where a mother bee was hatching from her winterlong slumber. Once, I found a nest, but the mother had flown east hours before I got there. I thought I was cursed.

"But I would not give up. At last, as I lay too tired to pull myself upright, the ground began to rock under me. There was a roar fit to bring the sky down, and near me a hillside collapsed into a valley. Afterward I staggered out onto the fresh brown slope and saw there a mother bee climbing from her nest. The avalanche had cleared away a thick layer of gravel the glaciers had left. Without it the mother would have perished, buried; and so would I."

She looked around at her spellbound audience, and her voice became forceful. "I set out to find my own people then, for I knew I was fit to lead a motherhold." Her eyes turned to Magwin Ghar.

"That may be true," Magwin said in a voice of calm and ice; "but you will not lead *my* motherhold."

"Then we will quarrel," Renata said. "Look at my bee. Have you got her equal?"

No one answered. Everyone knew they hadn't.

"I can have your bee," Magwin said.

"Do you challenge me?"

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Dubich held his breath, hoping Magwin would not be impetuous. She must not challenge; she needed to choose the weapon.

Magwin said nothing. "I smell old blood here," Renata gave the ritual taunt. "Are you afraid?"

Still no answer.

"Very well, then," Renata said, impatient. "I will challenge you. Prove your fitness to lead this motherhold."

"All these people are witness that you have made the challenge," Magwin smiled, a predator who had trapped her prey. "It is my right to choose the contest."

Renata straightened in surprise at the sudden vigor of her opponent's voice. She looked as if she suspected trickery. "Choose, then," she said.

"The times are gone when a holdmother needs brute force to rule. Leadership skills are what count now. I challenge you to a test of leadership. Each of us will take a swarm and the people to tend it. We will compete for one journey. At the end, whoever produces the best honey wins."

"Who will judge?" Renata asked, narrow-eyed. It was a highly unusual proposal.

"The honey brokers of Erdrum," Magwin said.

"Will you give me the right to pick from your swarm?"

"They are all good bees. You may pick if you please."

"And what of the honeycrafters — the hivekeepers, blenders, and refiners?"

"Persuade as many to follow you as you can."

A smile flashed across Renata's face, as if this challenge were to her liking. "And equipment?"

"We will share fairly."

"This is not a bad proposal, old woman," Renata said. "It is realistic."

"Then you accept, little girl?"

"I do."

The listeners looked troubled, for the decision would be on their shoulders, in a sense. Each one would have to choose whom to support. It would be the strangest journey a motherhold had ever taken.

Renata rose to leave, but before reaching the tent flap, she paused. "What about the loser?" she said.

Magwin Ghar hesitated. There was only one proper answer. "It must be

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an honorable death."

To die by one's own bees was the only way to be sure of honor. It was a painful death, but natural.

For the first time that night, Renata looked less than sure. With a slightly exaggerated confidence, she said, "Very well."

When all the witnesses were gone, Magwin turned to Dubich. "Ah, she's strong and brave, Dubich. But she can't match me in wits."

Dubich moved slowly around the tent, gathering the horn cups the visitors had left. Her plan gave him a deep foreboding.

Magwin said, "Dubich? Are you criticizing me?"

"I didn't say a word," he said.

"No, you just freeze the air with your silence. What is your problem with my plan?"

"This contest will set the young against the old," he said. "The youth of the motherhold will want to follow her."

"So? I will have wisdom, experience, and skill on my side."

"She will have energy and creativity on hers. And a new mother bee. She has a chance of winning, Magwin."

Magwin grinned. "It would not be a contest if she didn't."

Dubich wanted to smash the cups and roar. He held it back. It was not the right way. He must be clear-minded, clever, and quiet if he was to help her. She must never know. He picked up a cloak.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the extraction tent," he said.

But he lied. He was going to start fighting for her.

ON THE edge of camp, remote from traveled paths, lay the hive tent. At the start of each journey, the bees were kept there till they acclimated to Dawn, resetting their biological rhythms and starting their life cycles over. It was a dark and buzzing place. The tall ceramic cylinders were stacked in shadowy ranks, so thick they left only a small circle open in the center. There, alone as usual, Hivekeeper Yannas No-Name paced the claustrophobic circle of her skull.

Normally, the quiet music of the bees calmed her, drew her from her thoughts. She pressed her palms, then her cheek, against the side of a hive, to feel the soft vibration of their humming. On good days she could sense their love radiating out, washing her clean of the past. But not today. She

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mouthed a silent profanity at herself. Her life was a rotten tooth, existing only to cause her pain. The hive circle, her last refuge, her cocoon, had trapped her in an empty round of ritual self-delusions.

She picked up a metal bar and pried loose the lid of the nearest hive. Inside, it was dark, crawling with buzzing shapes, like the memories inside her head. Her skin prickled, overactive nerves fighting for her attention. She reached in, picked a bee at random from the comb, and took it to her table, where a candle burned.

The bee was a healthy worker, sleek and yellow. It was half the size of her thumb, and a vestige of caution made her wonder if it was too large for her purpose. With a shrug of careless self-riddance, she rolled up her sleeve, then placed the bee over the prominent blue vein near the elbow. Her forearm was pocked with old red puncture marks.

She took a sliver of wood from the tangle of gray hair behind her ear and bent forward to tease the bee. At first it was quiet, sluggish with cold. When at last it raised its unsheathed stinger in warning, she aimed a threatening jab at its head. It sank its barb into her arm.

She clenched her teeth, enjoying the pain. Her hand twitched in spasms as the muscles convulsed. Her face grew slick with sweat. The bee was trying to withdraw its stinger, but the barbs prevented it; it thrashed about, its last throes pumping out all that remained in its venom sac. At last the stinger ripped from its body, and it fell twitching to the floor.

The vein stood out, deep blue all up her arm. She panted for breath, her heart racing unevenly. In another person a sting so severe would have caused convulsions. Yannas clenched her teeth to keep from emitting a sound as the poison spread. If there was no seizure, the lancing pain would wear away; and as it did, the gnawing void inside her would fade. She would be able to hear the bees sing to her again.

There was a footstep outside; someone was coming. Yannas quickly rolled down her sleeve and flicked the dead bee into the shadows. She turned away from the entry to seem busy and hide the trembling of her hands.

DUBICH RHUD stood for a moment holding up the tent flap to let the sunrise light in. He watched Yannas's tall, lean form moving restlessly among the shadows. "Have you heard?" he asked.

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Yannas turned. Her face was flushed; angular brows, nose, and cheekbones jutted out from the gaunt, obscure landscape of her face. "Heard what?" she said too alertly.

Dubich frowned suspiciously and crossed the tent. He seized the hivekeeper's arm and bared it to the candlelight. The stinger was still embedded in the skin. With an exasperated oath, Dubich took a clip from his cloak and used it as a tweezers to pull the barb out, careful not to touch it himself. At last he looked at Yannas's eyes. They were glassy, bright, pain-free. Dubich's pent-in anger erupted, and he slapped Yannas in the mouth.

"Damn you! I don't care what you do to yourself, but it's Magwin's life you're playing with now. She has trusted your loyalty to save her. God, what a delusion! Her secret weapon, her genius — nothing but a wretched addict. If Renata knew, she would laugh her sides out."

The hivekeeper backed away, startled, fingering her face. Her flush was gone; she was clear and cold now. "It's not as if you didn't know."

"You promised to cut down."

"I have," Yannas said; but Dubich could tell it was one of her many lies. He and Magwin had gotten used to them over the years.

It had been seven journeys since they had come across her in the Summerlands, lying in a roadside ditch, a skeleton wrapped in skin. She had been dehydrated, near death, but when she came to consciousness in one of their tents, it was not water she asked for, but sinnom. Then they had known the fault lay with one of the motherholds. For sinnom was a kind of honey — dangerous, addictive, forbidden, and fabulously valuable. Someone, lured by wealth, had perverted their bees into distillers of liquid death.

Magwin had still been new as a holdmother then. Partly from a keen sense of honor, partly from rough kindness, she had adopted Yannas and sworn that she would turn the evil act of some unknown beekeeper into good. No one had ever lived to give up sinnom; but coached by Magwin, Yannas had done it. The bee venom had been the key: it dulled the craving, yet brought no pleasure itself, only pain. Seven journeys had passed, and each one had taken two journeys' worth of life from Yannas, yet the grip of the old addiction failed to fade.

Dubich already regretted having lashed out; it only gave her the excuse to lie. He breathed in and tried to draw on the reserves of patience he had used raising children. Though no child had ever given them the

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trouble Yannas had.

"You have to give it up, Yannas. If not for yourself, do it for the rest of us. You're the greatest hivekeeper this motherhold has ever had. You may be the greatest one living. And Magwin has made a foolish bargain trusting her life to you."

He told Yannas about Renata then. Yannas watched, immobile, her face complex with shadows as her life was with falsehoods.

"She can't win this contest without your help," Dubich finished.

Yannas was silent a long time. She would not look at Dubich's face. "She was wrong to trust me," she said at last.

"She had reason to. She saved your life. She would never ask for your thanks, but you owe it to her."

"I suppose I do." Yannas's voice was soft, but thick with irony.

Dubich studied her face, searching for a glimmer of love or loyalty. Droning, monotonous music filled the silence—the voice of the fine swarm Yannas had created, first as apprentice, then as assistant, finally as master hivekeeper.

Dubich turned away, defeated. "How is the swarm?" he asked.

"They weathered the last journeypiece well," Yannas said. "One hive is raising a new mother. We will be able to start a new hive soon." Her voice warmed when she spoke of them, as it never did for any mere human. Not even a human who needed her gratitude. If only, Dubich thought desperately, she felt toward us as she feels toward the bees.

"We will have a new mother bee soon, one way or another," he said; the words ached. "You will have to choose sides. I hope you will choose Magwin's."

He waited for an answer, but Yannas said nothing, and he had to leave without knowing her choice.

WHEN YANNAS gave out word that the bees were ready to dehive, the whole camp began to stir. Spirits were high; it was the beginning of the human journeycycle as well as the bees'. Soon a procession of wicker litters was winding up the path to the hive tent. A crowd of workers helped shift the heavy hives onto litters, each bound for a preselected site on the plain around them. Yannas stood at the center of the hubbub, passing out directions. For a space around her, everything was quiet, as if her presence stilled the chaos

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and vitality of the day.

She had marked the hive sites carefully in advance, and each pair of workers set off surely over the uneven ground with a sealed hive slung between them. Soon the hives would be scattered to the alpine meadows nestling in sheltered spots amidst the glacial washwater and scree. The nectar from these Dawn flowers was too earthy for human tastes; but the bees needed it to strengthen them for their long pilgrimage east.

The hive tent was only half-empty when Yannas called a halt; the rest of the hives were marked as Renata's. When the crowd had gone, Yannas slung a pack of tools over her shoulder, fastened a pouch of food to her belt, and set off to open the hives. She always did this part alone.

Up out of the river valley, the land was flat as far as the eye could see — a vast, glacier-scoured plain. A cold wind swept down off the ice from the west, unimpeded by anything but a few solitary boulders. It was not the same place they had come to start the last journey. That place had passed on into morning. This was new land, released only recently from the grip of night. Over their lifetimes, the children in camp might see this spot mature, bear fruit, and pass on into searing day; but they would never live to see it reborn. That was left to their descendants.

Yannas strode like a grim specter through the rock-and-water world. Her distended shadow leaped from rock to rock like something younger than she. She wore a one-piece suit, the legs tucked into high boots, and the neck and cuffs cinched tight to prevent stray bees from entering. Her dark bee veil was draped shawllike over her shoulders, but as she neared the first set of hives, she made no attempt to draw it over her face.

The hives lay in a valley, sheltered by a snaking ridge of gravel. Yannas checked to make sure each hive entrance faced the low sun, and that the cylinders were firmly placed on the rocky ground, tilting slightly forward so no rain would run inside. Where the tilt didn't satisfy her, she shimmed up the back with a flat piece of shale. Then she cracked open the tops with her pry bar to check the bees' supply of feed honey, noting down hives that were low. Last, she took the netting from over the broad hive mouth and sat down on a nearby rock to watch the bees emerge.

They were tentative at first, unsure of the new world that lay outside their doorway. At last a few began circling the hives on unpracticed wings. When Yannas saw one fly off toward a nearby clump of blooming everweep, she smiled. It transformed the gloomy landscape of her face like

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sun on a leaden lake.

She had never believed that any human was responsible for rescuing her from the ruins of her past. It was the bees who had done it. They had taught her to stop seeing herself everywhere, and to look at the world as they did.

Yannas studied the spot beneath her feet, making herself mentally into a bee. The apparent barrenness of the land was an illusion. It was a human mistake to see nothing here, for humans looked on the wrong scale. It was a world for the small and subtle. In every crack and nook, life had taken hold. Lichen first, then mosses with tiny white flowers, then grasses that grew more down than up. In the silence, Yannas could almost hear the burrowbugs sliding through the thin soil, the roots rustling and sipping water, the earth breathing in, released from the weight of winter.

When she set off toward the next hive site, she no longer stared gloomily at the ground ahead, but breathed the fresh air, head back. She went out of her way to visit a spring-fed pool where a few maiden's-tears bloomed. The names of the Dawn flowers were all sad. Yannas had named some herself, following the tradition.

The second cluster of hives had been carelessly placed, probably by youngsters who knew no better. Yannas set about righting the damage. This time she had to light her smoker to calm the bees in one hive where the comb tubes inside had been jostled from their places.

It was not until she reached the third cluster of hives that she realized she was being followed. Looking up from her work, she saw a shadow move against a faraway rock. Its source was invisible; but it was an old mistake in this country, to hide yourself and forget your shadow.

She sat down near the hives to eat her dinner and think about whoever followed her. She was a long way from the camp. If it was one of the roving barbarians, the hives were her best protection, for they knew and feared the bees. But she guessed it had to do with events in Magwin Ghar's motherhold.

There was a patter of falling gravel to her left. She looked up. Standing with one foot on a nearby boulder was Renata Oblin, one elbow on her raised knee, the other hand on her hip. She looked like the dashing heroine of an old story, ready for anything.

"Are you sitting there out of recklessness or bravado? she asked. She had some pebbles in one hand, and was working them around, scrape,

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clack.

"No," Yannas said. She turned back to her brown bread and nuts.

"You're three feet from a hive, and not wearing gloves or veil. I watched you. You didn't even put on the veil when you opened the hive."

"The bees know me. And the stings don't bother me as much as most."

"That's lucky. Most people would be long dead before they could get back to the motherhold if they were swarmed out here."

She came forward, but stopped five paces from Yannas. "I am Renata Oblin. Pardon me if I don't shake your hand."

"I am Yannas." She nodded in Renata's direction, barely polite.

"Yannas No-Name," Renata said. "I know. I heard about you even in Oblin Motherhold. Our hivekeepers were in awe of your Sweettooth and Morning Green blends. They used to say you were possessed."

Yannas's jaw muscles clenched as she chewed over the nuances of that statement.

"You should be back taking care of your bees," she said, putting the rest of her dinner back in its pouch. "They'll start to pine if you leave them sitting in the hive tent. They want to be free."

A smile crossed Renata's handsome face. "Offering advice to the enemy? What would Magwin Ghar say?"

"I am saying it for your bees' sake, not yours. Not that you'll listen." Yannas sounded sour and elderly even in her own ears.

"Oh, I will listen," Renata said seriously. "I will listen carefully to whatever you say."

Yannas turned a sharp, skeptical gaze on her. "What do you want?"

"I should think that was obvious. I want you on my side."

There was a long silence. The drone of bees and the distant, ever-present trickle of water were the only sounds in the chill, birdless air.

Renata spoke first. "In the camp, they told me not to try. They said you owed too much to Magwin Ghar. But it seemed to me you had another loyalty as well: to your craft. And I can make it possible for you to do things Magwin Ghar would never dream of."

She threw down her handful of pebbles and walked restlessly around, too full of energy to keep still. "This motherhold is lax; the standards are low. They don't produce nearly as much honey as they could, nor as high quality. It's not a lack of talent; it's a lack of leadership, of drive. I want to organize things more efficiently. I'll give you helpers for the drudgery, so

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you can concentrate on the creative part. I will improve the processing and distilling so it's equal to your hive culture."

She turned to face Yannas intently. "I want to give you a chance to achieve the recognition you deserve. We can set standards here. You're a brilliant artist working with poor tools. I can give you better ones."

It was as though someone had snipped time with a scissors and overlapped the edges, so that Yannas was faced with an earlier version of herself. She could remember how magical those words had been: ambition, achievement, success. She, too, had set out to be the best once, but not at hivekeeping. The bees were a refuge — an end, not a beginning.

"You've misjudged me," she said. "There is nothing I want to accomplish. I learned long ago that the world never thanks you for doing well. If you raise your head up above the rest, you're only more likely to get kicked in the face."

"That's not true!" Renata said positively. "You've got to have goals. You have to fix your eyes on something, then put every ounce of skill and strength into achieving it. Your success is in your own hands."

"Is it?" Yannas said. "How do you know?"

"If I didn't believe that, life would be like this land here —"

"Yes," Yannas said, looking out over the scoured plain where life was taking hold against all odds. "Life would be like this."

"—a barren, desolate plain. No peaks, no valleys, nothing noble or useful in it. Well, *my* life isn't going to be like that."

Yannas could remember when she had yearned for crags and gorges, for dangerous rapids and rainbows. Those had been years of glorious, self-destructive gestures. Now the bees had taught her to see fine textures, to praise little things.

"I had goals once," she said. "As lofty and compelling as yours."

"What happened?"

"The world paid not the slightest attention."

"Don't blame it on the world. It was you who gave up."

Gave up. The words chafed a spot still raw after all these years. "Yes, I gave up!" Yannas bit off the words. "Because I couldn't have made myself what I wanted to be."

"I don't believe that."

"Of course you don't. Why should you believe me just because I have lived twice as long and seen twice as much as you?"

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She got up, hefted her pack to her shoulder, and started off. She heard a step behind her, Renata following. She wheeled around, angry and bitter.

"Prove, prove, prove!" she said. "You youngsters always want to prove something, as if that's all that can make you solid and real. You all want to set yourselves apart, draw lines around yourselves and say, 'Here, that's where I begin and the rest of the world leaves off. This is *my* achievement. *I* am real.' And it never makes a damn bit of difference."

She turned and stalked off, stones crunching under her boots. I am a bitter, cynical old woman, she thought. I am dry and twisted like a brittle-root. I am a scarecrow on her path, with a sign hung under my neck: "Don't pass this way."

The grasses bent unheeded under her heels, then sprang up again when she had passed.

WHEN THE bees were safely out, the master honeycrafters met in Magwin Ghar's tent to plan the journey. For the first time in memory, Magwin posted sentinels to keep their deliberations from reaching the wrong ears.

The six who arrived were each experts, representing the 103 things one could create from bee culture: there was Brahm, the fermenter of wines and liqueurs; Bogdan, the chandler of sweet-scented beeswax; Zabra, the mixer of soaps, lotions, and pomades; and Reema, the creator of medicines and rubs from the potent honey of plants that calmed the heart, thinned the blood, or purged the digestion. Extractor Dubich Rhud was there, who purified, cured, and stored the raw honeys in his vast tent — now almost empty, but soon to become an archive of varietal honeys, each culled from a distinct blend of flowers. Last of all, Yannas came in and sat in the shadows by the tent flap.

As was customary, Magwin Ghar served a rich mead from the last journey. They sat awhile, tasting the sunny meadows in their cups, remembering the peaceful days spent gathering the honey they now drank. It had been a good journey, and they had had huge wagonloads of products to sell as they had retraced their steps west from day to dawn. Now the honey was almost gone, and the wagons were instead rich with grain, cloth, and tools bought from the towns and farms along their route.

"Ah, you should have seen the honeys we gathered in my third journey," old Brahm said, as if to forestall anyone impertinently suggesting

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that their last journey had been the best. "Why, we must have had fifty wagons, and our vats were twice as tall as I. We lived sweetly then!"

Not to be outdone, Bogdan spoke up with a reminiscence of his favorite journey, a story all of them had heard a hundred times, till they knew even the pauses and where to laugh. And all of them did laugh, except Magwin, who seemed preoccupied, and Yannas, who never laughed at anything.

The tent was filled with memories brighter than the candles, and everyone was expecting Magwin to refill their glasses, when instead she said, "We need to put our minds to strategy, my friends. We need to plan a honey that will humble young Renata Oblin and win us her queen."

"The upstart chit!" Zabra grumbled. "She knows no more about honey than my elbow does."

"Maybe so," said Brahm, "but my best apprentice has gone off to join her."

This led to a long series of complaints and recriminations. Half the young people in the motherhold seemed to have defected; the other half were getting forward about proposing crazy new ideas. Three girls who had reached the wander-age, inspired by Renata, had set off to seek a mother bee despite all their mothers' dissuasion. The young men thought of nothing but jockeying for Renata's attention. At last, Magwin held up her hands impatiently. "There is nothing we can do. We knew it would be like this."

"I never heard of such a duel," Zabra said, half under her breath. "Dragging the whole motherhold in—"

Magwin spoke loudly to drown her out. "I thought of using our Crystal Dew. We've done well with it for three journeys now, and it's a favorite in Erdrum."

"I can't keep our apothecary honeys stocked without going farther south to get some forest-flower honey," Reema said. "It's been two journeys since we've gotten any bloodbloom or hoar. My stores are almost gone."

Others spoke up with objections. Journey plannings were always contentious, and the final route was inevitably a compromise hammered out to balance conflicting needs.

After much wrangling, Magwin squinted into the shadows by the door. "You've said nothing, Yannas. What do you think?"

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The new formula was not clumsy, but there was a recklessness to it.

Yannas had been thinking how much like mollusks they all were: all crusted round with shells of experience. Every experiment they had tried, every idea explored, had formed another layer of crust. By now, Magwin's honeycrafters were nearly impervious to mistake, but paralyzed by the accretion of things they had tried. Yannas could feel her own experience dragging like a dead weight on her. She didn't want to add more.

"I think Crystal Dew is a bad idea," she said at last.

"But it's your own formula!" Magwin protested.

"It's become too familiar. Can we win with an old honey if Renata creates something novel and new?"

"She hasn't got the experience," Zabra said, as if that settled everything.

Magwin raised a hand to silence her, eyeing Yannas curiously. "So you think we should try a new formula?"

"I think we need a honey like none that has ever been tasted. A honey so bewitching, a single drop captures the senses. It must be a distillation of rain, time, sun, and the souls of flowers."

Their faces showed that they had all dreamed of such a honey, once. Perhaps, in their youths, they had even believed this was possible.

"What formula do you have in mind?" Magwin asked softly.

"You will not believe me if I tell you."

"Try us."

So Yannas began to recite the list of flowers whose nectars she would blend through the alchemy of the bees. The others listened, concentrating. They had all learned as children to decipher the formulas, composing little songs to remember the hard ones. Every child in the motherhold carried in his or her head the formulas for the staple honeys; but only the honeycrafters knew the hundreds of specialized formulas passed down through the generations.

When Yannas finished, there was silence; it had been a long time since any of them had had to critique a new formula, other than the brash and clumsy inventions of the apprentices. This one was not clumsy, but there was a recklessness to it.

"You depend heavily on the border flowers, those at the edge of night

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and day," Magwin said at last.

"Those are the flowers whose tastes are deep," Yannas said; "they are the ones who have suffered."

"Meadowmatch?" Brahm asked. "It's a stimulant nectar, not a culinary one. It stings in the mouth, like nettles."

"It will be very dilute in a comb blend with primweed and shattercup. You will scarcely taste it, but it will leave a tingle in the mouth that will cleanse the palate like springwater."

They raised more objections. At first, Yannas justified her choices; but as the criticism kept coming, she became touchy, then defensive, then finally lapsed into a glowering silence.

When they had demolished virtually the whole formula and suggested a dozen substitutions, Magwin said, "Well, what is your verdict? Dubich?"

"It might work," he said, "but with so much hanging on the outcome, it is terribly risky."

Brahm?"

"Not without revisions."

"Zabra?"

"It's a reckless experiment. We can't afford it."

"Reema?"

"The route would be too hard."

"Well." Magwin looked around. Yannas's eyes were on the smoke hole, her jaw clenched. "Yannas?" Magwin said softly. "Has Renata approached you?"

They all looked at her. Yannas stared at Magwin, knocked from her self-absorption by the bluntness of the question. At last she said, "Yes."

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Zabra. "The bitch!"

No one else spoke. The next question was on all their minds: What had Yannas answered?

Magwin did not ask it. Instead, she leaned back against her pillows and said, "I have decided on our journeycourse. We will follow the route of Yannas's formula, without revision. It will be hard on us, and there will be little chance to gather the ingredients for our staple honeys. We will have to cope. It is for a good cause."

Her tone closed off discussion. Zabra rose abruptly, then turned to the tent flap, sparing only a single suspicious look at Yannas. The others followed more slowly. Yannas sat frozen, staring at Magwin Ghar. Last of

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all, she turned to go.

"Yannas," Magwin said.

Yannas turned. They were alone.

"Did you think you could goad me into giving you an excuse to join Renata?" Magwin said.

It was true, yet not true. Yannas felt a surge of anger that Magwin knew her so well. "Renata?" she said contemptuously. "She's a vain, reckless dreamer. A child. I would no more work for her than. . . ."

"Than what?"

Than grasp after lost youth? Yannas was silent.

"Well, I hope you will work for me now," Magwin said seriously. "I have put my life in your hands."

Yannas looked down, scowling. There was so much past between them that their shells were fused. There was no pulling apart.

"Don't worry," Magwin said. "I am content with the risk. Just do your best."

After Yannas had gone, Dubich returned to the tent. He blew out the candles, then sat down and watched Magwin sip a horn of mead. "You're taking a big risk," he said. "Zabra is saying that Yannas is a turncoat and her formula was planned to make us lose. She is saying you took Renata's bait."

"Jealous old whiner. We have to stop her, Dubich. Everyone must have absolute faith in Yannas."

"What about you?" Dubich asked. "Do you have faith in this formula?"

"I was about to ask you."

"I told you already: risky. It might be inspiration or delusion. Now you."

"I don't know, Dubich. But I've learned over the journeys that if you have a genius on your hands, you don't try to steer her. Just leave her alone. That's what I'm going to do."

"I'm glad it's not my life staked on it."

A smile spread across Magwin's face. "I'm glad it's not yours, too. Come here." He took the pillow next to her. She ran a finger down his cheek, then playfully kissed his nose. Not in the mood for joking, he drew her against him, aware how every knot and hollow of their bodies fit together. All the things he had taken for granted — the softness of her skin where the sun had not touched it, the contented little "Hmmm" she gave — all

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seemed impossibly precious. They rolled back on the pillows together, every touch poignant with the knowledge that there would be no long forever together.

BEFORE LONG, Renata's group had packed up their hives, tents, and equipment, and pulled out of camp, bound for the first stop on whatever journeycourse they had chosen. People gathered to watch them go, expecting to see amateurish disorder — but they didn't. The move was smoothly run, without a single voice raised.

Yannas stood at the entrance of the hive tent, glumly watching a troop of bare-chested young men hoisting the last of the hives onto litters. She had tried to offer them advice to avoid jarring the bees, but they had told her they knew what they were doing. The galling thing was, they did. Yannas knew her own hives would not be moved with such swift efficiency.

"Sure you won't change your mind?"

Yannas turned; it was Renata. She was dressed in leather: tight-fitting boots and elbow-length gloves that glistened as she moved.

"Whose formula are you following?" Yannas asked. She wondered which of this group was capable of more than mimickry.

"Several of us have ideas," Renata said. "I gather Magwin Ghar will follow yours?"

Yannas nodded.

"Then I suppose you are my mortal enemy," Renata said. Her tone was light, but her eyes were serious.

It came to Yannas that if she succeeded, Renata would die. All of that boundless daring, arrogance, hope, silly flamboyant gloves — all would cease to be. Utterly extinguished, never more to tempt or tease her with memories. Dead as surely as that other youth like her, that youth Yannas had once been.

"Go away," Yannas said harshly.

Renata stood watching her, puzzled.

"Go on! Go join your young heroes and athletes. Leave me to my crones and codgers."

A smile flashed across Renata's tanned face. She turned and trotted down the slope after the litter-bearers, like a frisky young colt. When she came up to the last one, she clapped him on the back with a comradely

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gusto. Yannas could hear their laughter faint on the air.

THEY SAW no more of Renata's group for a long time. Even at the well-known meadows where they often encountered other motherholds, there was no sign of her. "She must have led them far away," Magwin Ghar said to Dubich. "Too bad. I was counting on some defections."

"Maybe she foresaw that," Dubich said.

Magwin shook her head. "She's clever, damn her."

For Magwin's group the journey started out badly. Lacking many strong young workers, Magwin had to transfer the hard work onto older shoulders. Grandfathers who had happily retired to camp work were again pressed into carrying hive litters and scouting. To free up young mothers with children, Magwin organized a child wagon and persuaded some grandmothers to take on its wailing load.

As the journeypiece passed, the grumbling grew. Everyone was working harder, yet the vats of honey in the mixing tents were not as full as they should have been. Long after the motherhold should have passed east into the gentle plains of Morning, they were still seeking out rare stands of flowers in the rough, unmapped country on the edge of Dawn.

The cold began to get into Dubich's bones. It took them fifteen long whiles trudging through torrents of rain to reach their fourth stop, and at the end, people set up the tents wherever they fell, in a bedraggled line. After supervising the erection of the mixing tent, Dubich came home to find his and Magwin's tent no more than a heap of soggy canvas on the ground. Silently cursing, he wrestled the sopping cloth over the poles, then went inside to start a fire. Another supper of pea soup was ahead, for there were no farms from which to buy better fare in this country.

Magwin arrived soon after. "Damned stubborn *artist*," she said, and Dubich knew she had been speaking to Yannas. "There was an easier route, you know. But she had to have the sweet-memory with the blue veins, even though no one but she can tell it from the regular kind."

"Close that tent flap," Dubich said irritably.

Magwin took off her dripping cloak and hung it up, though everything was equally wet. "The scouts say this river we're camped on leads down to a nice, fertile prairie," she said glumly. "Lots of marsh-crowns and meadowcup there. Birds, game. Sunshine."

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Dubich said nothing. That was how their quarrels always started, with him silent and icy. It drove her into a rage.

This time she didn't rise to it. "What are people saying, Dubich?" she asked wearily.

"What do you suppose? They're cold and tired and angry, and they're blaming Yannas's formula."

Magwin was silent awhile, then came to a decision. "We're going to leave this country. I have more to consider than just her formula."

Suddenly afraid he had persuaded her, Dubich said, "The formula is your life, Magwin."

"I know. But I'm still holdmother."

The way down the river valley proved to be a steep, rocky trail. The wagons could barely get through. Magwin walked back and forth along the slow-moving line in the driving rain, joking to encourage people. From his seat in the vat wagon, Dubich wondered how she managed to hide how low her own spirits were.

Ahead, the trail plunged into a torn shred of mist. As the hive litters passed a slippery patch, one exhausted litter-bearer stumbled. The heavy ceramic cylinder teetered, hit the ground, then fell. It toppled slowly, end over end down the steep slope.

While Dubich still watched, frozen in horror, a streak of gray rain gear appeared from nowhere, flying down the slope. It was Yannas. Dubich jumped from the wagon and clambered after. When he arrived, a small crowd of people had gathered. He saw with a sickened heart that the hive was cracked open, irreparable. The hivekeeper was kneeling beside it; confused bees circled dizzily. When Yannas looked up at Magwin, her face was streaming wet, and Dubich did not think it was just the rain.

"We will have to sacrifice the mother bee," she said in a tight voice. "We have no spare hives."

Magwin looked grim. Mother bees were scarce enough without losing healthy ones. "Do what you have to," she said.

"Get away, all of you," Yannas said fiercely. "Leave me alone."

Magwin motioned them away. From a distance they watched as Yannas located the mother of the broken hive. For a moment she bowed her head over the large, helpless insect, then smashed her with a rock.

It took a long while to coax the swarm into another hive. Many of the bees would not leave their old home, where their mother's eggs lay in their

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broken combs. There was nothing to do but leave them to perish.

It was a silent camp that night. They had lost a hive. Such a thing had not happened in ten journeys. Only a slovenly, ill-kept motherhold could be so careless. Shame slunk from tent to tent, and people began talking of the ill luck that followed them.

AS THEY traveled east, pausing often to let the bees feed, the sun gradually rose higher in the sky, and the broad, level plains spread before them. Morning was a pleasant, settled land where they came across farms, villages, and even slowly moving cities — since, as Ping turned, everything on its face turned with it. Everyone welcomed them — especially the children, who saw only the confectionery wagon — but also the bakers, cooks, and canners, who haggled for the special blends. Everyone needed honey. There were sometimes rumors of plants or trees with sap sweet enough to make sugar; but most people laughed at the thought of anything replacing honey.

But this journey they could not loiter long in Morning. Yannas's formula called for a few of its rich, sanguine honeys.

They passed quickly through the time of primweed and aspen groves, then skirted the fertile wineberry bogs. They were making for the Straits of Carriwell, the narrow bridge between the seas that lay across their path to the Summerlands. The motherholds often met there and celebrated the mid-journey Festival of Flowers together. Everyone was looking forward to it.

As they neared their final Morning camp, Yannas traveled ahead to locate sites for her hives along the Windroot River. The Dawnlands had left a glacial chill inside her. She had come away to warm her mind — not in the sun, but in the sight of the maturing land. She halted at the edge of a marsh, letting the healing breeze wash over her. Nearby, a pair of whoorowits was courting. The male erupted from the reeds, a flash of iridescent green scales. The female met him in midair, and they pirouetted together, synchronized as jugglers, the biology of youth in rushing flight. Yannas smiled at the sight. Her face felt cracked, like a statue trying to smile.

She waded in knee-deep among a flaming stand of marsh-crowns, pinching off spent blooms to help the new buds grow. They were skinny-stalked flowers, awkward adolescents, brash and still a bit vulnerable, like

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the rest of this land. As she reached out for another bloom, she stopped —for a bee was already working this stand. There was no way to tell, but somehow she felt it was one of *her* bees — or had been.

When she looked, the hive was there, sheltered under the gentle bluff. It was a Ghar hive; Renata was here. For a moment she hesitated, for it was bad form to inspect another motherhold's hive; but her desire to be sure her bees were not being mistreated overcame her manners.

The bees seemed active, shuttling in and out of the hive entrance with their burdens of pollen and nectar. But as she watched, it occurred to Yannas they were almost *too* active. A pungent smell hung about the hive. Suspicious, she took her stout pry knife and cracked open the hive cover. As she lifted it, the smell enveloped her.

"Get back!" a male voice ordered.

Yannas looked up to see Hudin, Zabra's son, standing bare-chested on the lip of the bluff several yards away. He had a bow and arrow, drawn and pointed at Yannas.

"Put that thing down!" Yannas ordered angrily. "Didn't your mother teach you anything?"

Instead of obeying, he gave a loud whistle. Two figures appeared nearby, then came dashing through the grass toward them.

"Get away from that hive," Hudin ordered, gesturing with his bow. His voice was tough and arrogant. Yannas lowered the hive cover and moved away. He came up and took her stick and knife. As the other two arrived, he said, "I caught a spy."

"Stop this playacting," Yannas said. "You make me laugh."

He gave her a rough shove. "Move."

Guarded by the three young men, Yannas walked north.

They came upon Renata's camp where the river broadened into a placid lake, dammed by its own delta. The camp was compact, laid out with discipline; Yannas could not help but think of the straggling collection Magwin Ghar's camps had become. Hudin left them to run on ahead.

"So Magwin Ghar has finally caught up," Renata said as she strode toward them across the camp circle. Her hair was swept back and her sleeves rolled up. She walked side by side with Hudin, hips almost touching, with a bravura that reminded Yannas of the whoorowits.

"We've been on the lookout for you," Renata said. "You took your time

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in the Dawnlands. The Festival of Flowers is over; the other motherholds have gone on."

We were following a plan," Yannas said sourly.

"While you froze your bees, we have been enjoying ourselves," Renata said airily. "We have learned a lot, and tried out many new ideas."

"Like drugging your bees?" Yannas accused.

Renata glanced at Hudin. He said, "We caught her snooping in one of our hives."

There was a pause. "It's a distillation of meadowmatch," Renata said at last. "We put it in a tray at the bottom of the hive, and it stimulates the bees. We get a third more honey in the same time."

"Did no one tell you about the harm to your bees?"

"There was some old wives' tale. But we tried it, and our bees don't seem harmed." She paused. "Will they be?"

She was pumping for information. Yannas felt outrage; they had experimented on their bees without even knowing the risks.

"Old wives' tales are there for a reason. Your bees will be fine this journey, but you will wear them out. You will get nothing from them next journey."

Renata shrugged. "It's *this* journey I'm worried about."

"A good holdmother always worries about next journey."

"Tell me that when I'm holdmother."

Yannas wanted to slap her. Irresponsible, self-confident girl, so full of her sense of control. She did not know how quickly events could take it from her. How could she know? She had never failed.

Hudin was whispering to Renata. He looked restless. Renata nodded. "Far better to hold her. Without her hivekeeper, Magwin Ghar would be doomed."

The words made Yannas's heart hum with anxiety. But she knew Renata, knew her too well. In a proud, slightly contemptuous tone, she said, "It would be a dishonest way to win. Everyone would say you could not win fair."

They were the right words. Renata said, "She is right, Hudin. We don't need to use tricks. I have a better idea." She whispered into the young man's ear. He frowned, but turned and walked off. "Come with me," Renata said. "You will not leave without tasting our hospitality."

Renata's tent was spartan and functional, the tent of a field commander.

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But the food she served was good and plentiful, better than Yannas had eaten for journeypieces. She tried not to look like she was enjoying it.

As they were finishing the meal, Hudin came in with a honeypot. Renata opened it and spread some pale honey on a rice cracker. She held it out. "We just finished this blend."

Yannas took it, consumed with curiosity. It had a delicate aroma. "Sweet-memory," she said.

"Yes, we've got quite a lot of it."

Yannas let a drop of the sunshine-colored liquid fall onto her tongue, letting the smell drift up her nostrils. Then she bit into it.

The honey had been blended with striking originality. It was a simple formula that tasted of dawn and early blooms. It filled Yannas's mouth with a distillation of young things, long-legged flowers and a land that had never known failure. Memories rushed to her head. She could never make a honey like this. Not now.

"You like it?" Renata said.

Yannas looked down to hide her face. For the first time, she realized she might not win this contest. Renata had no expertise, but, with simple green vitality, she might prevail.

"I am no judge," Yannas said. "This is a young honey. Too young for me."

All the way home, as she pushed through the tall grass, the memory of that taste haunted her.

THEY HAD come to the sun-baked shortgrass prairie, when the epidemic struck. It started among the children. One moment they were swimming and running half-dressed in the sun, brown as mud; the next they lay shaking with a fever, dry cough, and rash.

Reema, the apothecary, brought the diagnosis to Magwin Ghar's tent. The motherhold was camped by a wide, muddy river that meandered through the plains till it disappeared in the blue distance. Dubich had rolled up the sides of their tent to let in the cool eastern breeze, and now sat cross-legged, repairing some leather. The sun hung unblinking in the sky.

"Spotted fever," Reema said. "And I used the last of my hoarhoney today. We took a risk not going south to replenish our curative honeys. Our grandchildren may pay for our mistake."

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Magwin Ghar said nothing to the reproach, but Dubich knew how she flinched inside. Everyone had something to blame her with these days.

"It is not too late to go south," she said.

"It is if we want to spend time gathering desert honeys."

"We can do both."

Dubich's bones ached at the thought. He said quietly, "It is a long way to the forests where the hoarflowers grow. We cannot get there and back again in time."

"We will have to," Magwin Ghar said doggedly. "I will not have my grandchildren die."

It was a hellish journeypiece. Half the motherhold was sick, the other half worn out with doctoring, yet Magwin still pushed them to travel fast. By the time they reached the forest, two children had died, and some said it was the journeying that did it.

"But if we hadn't hurried, more might have died," Magwin said desperately to Dubich. "What do they expect from me?"

They stayed to milk the hoarflowers only till the sickness had crested. When they turned wearily toward the desert again, they met the other motherholds heading for the Erdrum market, their wagons heavy with brimming honey vats, ready to trade. A third of Yannas's formula was still ungathered.

Their last camp lay in a dusty canyon under the glaring forenoon sun. The desert flowers had never seemed more scattered or fleeting. Yannas worked like a fiend, scouting out the stands of flowers and checking the hives. She would come in after long, solitary trips, her hair and eyebrows white with desert dust, her face and hands black from the sun. Then she would work feverishly with Dubich in the hot mixing tent, experimenting with new combinations whose ingredients she refused to reveal.

The boys who went out to fetch in the combs told of a pungent odor emanating from the trays Yannas had placed in the hives. Their grandmothers hushed them and said, "Don't you repeat stories like that." When Dubich mentioned the rumor to Magwin Ghar, she simply said, "I don't believe it." But her eyes said that she did, and didn't care.

But there was another secret Yannas kept closer. There was one hive whose location no one but she knew. On the edge of a wind-scoured gully, she had found a stand of spike-leaved plants, spiral cones with a single white flower on top. The first time she came upon them, she stood

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looking for a long time. Their name was sinnom, and it did not appear on any lawful formula. A few drops of honey from this plant would bring such pleasure and comfort that a lifetime of happiness crowded into a minute could not equal it.

The smell of sinnom honey came back to her as vividly as if it were yesterday. She had kept it in a thin-necked green bottle. At first she had taken it only in leisure, lying entranced in its spell instead of sleeping. Then she had started taking it in waking times, and all the little miseries and defeats of life became lost in its glow. The honey had been her success, her fulfillment. She could see it even now, the color of gold and more precious, the antidote to everything.

She turned away, feeling the aching cavity the sinnom had left. She stumbled blindly down the path toward the nearest hive. When she reached it she seized one of the guard bees from the entrance. Furious, it stung her hand, and she sank to her knees, clutching her wrist, letting the pain burn through her till it had cauterized her nerves. Then she closed up the hive, strapped it to her back, and, cursing herself, moved it to the gully where the sinnom plants stood.

Since then the bees had slowly been filling their hive with the priceless, deadly nectar. Whenever she came to check the hive, Yannas soaked a rag in liquor and tied it over her face to keep herself from smelling its intoxicating perfume. She told herself she needed it only for insurance, only as a last resort. She would never take it again.

The combs filled too slowly, and time passed too fast. At last they had to take what scant honey they could get. The hives were brought in, and the half-filled combs were taken out and marked; then, in the busy extractor tent, workers loaded the cylindrical comb frames one by one into the spinner. Everyone took turns pushing the treadle lever that kept the spinner constantly going through sleep and waking, till all the combs were empty.

They were the last motherhold to arrive in Erdrum. The broad plain south of the city bubbled with white dome tents as if someone had lathered it with soap. All the shady camp spots were taken, so Magwin Ghar's motherhold had to camp on a sunbaked spot far from the well. As they moved slowly to erect their tents, her people looked like leaves blown in off the desert: dry, dusty, cracked-leather-skinned. They were like wizened relics among the crowds of visitors and shoppers.

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Their task was far from over. As soon as the mixing tent was erected, a new stage began. The pots of labeled honeys were sorted and strained; then Dubich banished all visitors but Yannas, and set about the task of measuring and mixing. His worktable was a labyrinth of glass vessels, gleaming with bottled sunlight. Each honey had its signature: clear as water, milky as wax, diamond, gold, garnet, and amber. Some were thick as reluctant syrup; others poured like wine. Some were sweet, others spiced or heady. He knew them all.

Every motherhold in the huge camp soon knew of the strange battle brewing. As he toiled side by side with Yannas, scarecely sleeping, Dubich knew the other honeycrafters were probably sitting around their campfires speculating on strategy. Would the combatants gamble on one of the new spiced blends — Amberfoil, perhaps, or Cinnabar? Would they modify their stronger honeys by heating them first, or use them raw? Would they strive for a striking color, or emphasize bouquet and flavor? Through the haze of weariness, Dubich sometimes smiled to think how surprised they would be.

For it was a honey like no other. As he tasted and tested, Dubich alternated between manic confidence and fear. Sometimes he thought it was inspired. At others, insane.

Word came that Renata had visited Magwin's tent to bargain over the time and place of the contest, the identities and number of the judges.

"She was shrewd," Magwin said when he came, exhausted, to her tent to rest. "I wonder what happened to that reckless youngster who came down out of the hills." As he drifted off to sleep, his last sight was of Magwin curled on her cushions like a wily old lizard. Her hair had gone entirely white since the journey started.

Yannas could not sleep. She had been at Dubich's side for many whiles; now she sat alone in the closely guarded mixing tent. Her masterwork was almost done. She dipped a tasting-stick into the glass beaker and let a drop of honey fall onto her tongue. A drama of conflicting flavors unfolded in her mouth. Dark, brooding spices followed by a tingle of shattercup like the near passage of death; then a hint of aftertaste, fleeting as intuition, that might be fresh-born flowers, and might not. It was a masterful honey; but one addition could make it irresistible. Hidden deep in her inside pocket was a small flask of sinnom honey. She had extracted it herself when Dubich was asleep in his tent. One drop mixed into the pot would

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be impossible to detect. But it would make the judges crave the honey beyond reason, yearn to recapture the taste as if it were youth itself.

The flask felt hard against her ribs. She rose and walked out into the hot sun, her eyes burning from dust and overwork. She wandered aimlessly among the tents, past a boy washing clothes and a noisy marriage party, past a jeweler from the city hawking golden bees.

"Yannas No-Name," a voice said at her side. She turned and saw Bosna, Reema's daughter, who had left a journey ago to become one of Renata's troupe.

"Is your honey ready?" the girl asked. But no, she was no longer a girl. There were frown lines in her forehead, and her mouth had a pinched look.

"Almost," Yannas said, distrusting the woman.

"Renata's is done," Bosna said. She waited as if expecting a question; when Yannas said nothing, she continued, "It is very good."

"I have no doubt," Yannas said.

Bosna glanced around. "Would you like to taste it?" She unbuttoned a pocket and drew a glass flask out. "I managed to get a sample from the mixing tent. I want Magwin Ghar to have the advantage. I never thought she was a good holdmother till I had to put up with Renata. She's an arrogant bitch, that one."

And you are a treacherous viper, Yannas thought. She took the flask, intending to dash it to the ground, but its color caught her eye: a light gold, like a young child's hair. She clutched it, overcome with the desire to taste.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" Bosna whispered.

"No," Yannas said. She was already an accomplice. She turned and walked away. Oblivious of all around her, she threaded through the busy camp till she found a deserted cul-de-sac and crouched down, gazing at the contraband flask. Slowly, she uncorked it and let the aroma drift up to her nose. It was unspiced. Renata had wagered on simplicity. Yannas tilted the flask and let the honey drop to her tongue.

Its flavor was faint at first, and Yannas groped to place it; but it grew more vivid as it warmed and dissolved on the tongue. Yannas took a second taste, then a third. A sharp, nostalgic ache pierced her. She was surrounded by long-gone years of rustling grass, and wind-pleated lakes, and birds playing catch-'em in the sky out of sheer joy in their wings. It

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was a cordial of youth, of exuberance. It was simple, yes, but astonishingly original. There was even a hint of tree sap in it. Yannas had never thought of feeding her bees on tree sap.

She realized there were tears in her eyes. No honey had ever moved her like this, not since the old days. She wondered if she had been beaten. Beside this, her own honey was like the tears of tortured flowers, a honey of pain and endings. Would it be enough to kill the spell of Renata's youth? Yannas fingered the other flask in her pocket, longing to let it erase the terrible choice before her.

THE JUDGMENT was held under the walls of Erdrum, in a broad space cleared of tents for the occasion. When Magwin Ghar arrived, surrounded by her master honeycrafters, the crowd was already large; toward the back, people perched on wagons and barrels to see. The three judges were waiting, seated on campstools in a wagon. Magwin Ghar took her place beside Renata. Behind them, their respective hivekeepers waited, each with a buzzing broodpot that carried death.

Renata went first. As her extractor came forward with the flask, she stood watching confidently, arms crossed and head thrown back. The judges passed the flask around to scan its color, and held it up to the sun to test for clarity. Then they uncorked it, and each sampled its aroma. At last they took glass tasting-sticks and dipped them into the flask.

Dubich watched their expressions intently. One was smiling, a faraway look on his face. Another was slowly nodding. The third looked deeply impressed. The honey was clearly not the amateurish, patch-together job Dubich had desperately hoped for. The judges tasted again, then discussed it among themselves. At last they took water to cleanse their mouths for the second honey.

Dubich stepped forward from Magwin's side. He kept the flask veiled till he was before the judges, then swept away the silk cover and revealed its deep garnet color. There was a murmur of admiration from the crowd. The judges took it, smelled, then finally tasted. One frowned in concentration; then, the aftertaste came, his expression changed to surprise. The judges tasted again, avidly. Their discussion this time was animated. At last one stood. The crowd fell still.

"These are both excellent honeys," he said. "Each has broken new

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ground that we hope other motherholds will follow. But the choice is clear. For skill, drama, and subtlety, the prize must go to Magwin Ghar."

The crowd hummed like a thousand bees. Giddy with relief, Dubich put his arm around Magwin and gave her a quick squeeze. It had worked. Renata turned with unbroken poise to concede, offering her hand. Magwin took it, then quickly turned away.

Two men stepped to Renata's side. She greeted them without a hint of fear. They led her to a cleared spot, then brought forward the pot of bees that would have been hers. Her face serious, she stripped off her gloves and rolled back her collar and sleeves. A woman came forward to rub her arms and neck with the extract that would simultaneously attract and madden the bees. The crowd melted back, clearing a wide space around her.

Raised voices came from near the judges' wagon. A heated debate was going on amid the honeycrafters who had gathered to taste the contesting honeys. One of the judges called out, "Stop! There has been a serious challenge."

The extractor from the Borg Motherhold emerged from the crowd, holding the wine-red flask. "This honey has sinnom in it!" she announced.

Magwin Ghar wheeled around upon Yannas. The hivekeeper's face was waxy with astonishment. "No!" she said. "It doesn't!"

"Liar!" Magwin growled low. "Damned crazy addict! Did you think you could get away with it? They'll have my life for this."

"There is no sinnom in it!" Yannas strode toward the judges' wagon. People hastily made way for her. She took the flask and faced the judges. "I will prove it. If I had put sinnom in this honey, I would not dare to taste it." She took a long draft.

As the honey took effect, she froze, her face rigid. The flask slipped from her senseless fingers and shattered on the ground. Her eyes glazed in the unmistakable grip of sinnom addiction.

"Damn you, damn you," Magwin whispered, her fists clenched.

"This is shameful!" Holdmother Alphra Borg stepped from the crowd, other holdmothers close behind. "This crime will slur all the motherholds unless we punish it swiftly. We cannot allow sinnom in our tents." Her voice dropped, but kept its metal edge. "I would not have thought it of you, Magwin. You know the penalty. You and your hivekeeper will die together."

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Magwin's jaw muscles knotted. Nearby, Yannas stood like a statue. There were tears streaking down her face.

"No!" Dubich stepped forward, and his weary voice made them all fall silent. "Magwin knew nothing about it. It was I who put the sinnom in the honey. I stole it from Yannas; she never knew."

Magwin stared in disbelief. "Dubich! You?"

He turned to her, unable to meet her eyes. His gamble had lost; he had turned her victory into unspeakable dishonor. "I'm sorry, Magwin. I couldn't bear the thought of your losing."

He would not have blamed her for denouncing him. He had betrayed her, dissolved her lifelong reputation in a single drop of sinnom. But she took his hand and gripped it in her strong fist. Quietly, she said, "I pressed you too hard, and you broke. Broke out of love and loyalty. You're too good for me, old man."

"Is this your defense?" Alphra Borg demanded. "That Dubich Rhud is the one to pay?"

Magwin paused. She looked out at the horizon and took a deep breath, as if savoring life and the vitality still in her. Then her eye fell on Renata, standing to one side. Renata, who had accepted the consequences and faced death so coolly a moment ago.

"No," Magwin said. "I am responsible. The whole crazy contest was my idea, my plot to cheat nature just a little longer. But I couldn't win without breaking those who love me, and whom I love." She looked at Dubich, and suddenly her eyes were glassy with tears. But she spoke on, turning once more to Renata, her voice swelling: "I have one consolation. I have created myself a worthy successor."

Alphra Borg said slowly, "Then you and Dubich Rhud will pay the price."

Magwin turned to Dubich, a pang in her look. He said softly, "I am willing."

Tenderly, she reached out and touched his hair. She looked as if she were seeing him for the first time in many months. "It's all white, Dubich. Your hair. You've gotten to be an old man. So old, so tired. And still a romantic fool."

They embraced then, pressed close against each other with the darkness at their backs. Then, holding hands tightly as new lovers, they turned together to where the broodpot stood waiting.

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THE DRUG was leaving. Yannas knew it, though the taste still lingered on her tongue, sweet with oblivion. She was falling away, falling back into the world of longing and loss. She struggled not to return to it, but someone was gripping her hand and urging her back. It was Magwin Ghar. So many times over the journeys, she had dragged Yannas back against her will, forcing her to bear the emptiness of the sunlit world.

"Go away," she said.

"No," the voice replied.

It was not Magwin Ghar. Yannas looked down and saw it was not Magwin holding her hand, either. It was Renata. "What are you doing?" she said.

They were sitting on campstools in the open field beneath the walls of Erdrum. There were no crowds any longer; a last few people were filing away or standing about in clumps, talking.

"I am seeing to my hivekeeper," Renata said.

"Your—" Yannas stopped, realizing what must have happened. Grief seized her, sharp as a beesting, numbing her even to the drug-hunger. She bent over in pain.

"Is she gone?" Yannas asked at last.

"Yes," Renata said. "And Dubich Rhud, too."

A tear dropped on Renata's hand. "I loved her," Yannas said.

"A lot of people loved her," Renata said softly. "I hope someday I can say the same." She tightened her grip. "Yannas, you have to help me now. I have a lot to learn. I need you."

Yannas wanted to howl out, No! I can't! I am too tired. I can't start over again.

"We all need you," Renata said.

There was no strength left in her to push back hunger, and age, and emptiness, and try to go on.

The sunlit field swam before Yannas's eyes. She rose, clenching her jaw. "I have to see to my bees," she said.

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Sheri S. Tepper is the author of the critically acclaimed science fiction novel, Grass. *Yet the following story is anything but science fictional. "The Gourmet" is about Carol Magusen's drive through a lonely stretch of the southwest — and her encounter with a very hungry ghost.*

The Gourmet

By Sheri S. Tepper

CAROL TURNED THE car radio on every now and then after she left Rocky Ford, Colorado, and headed west. Mostly it seemed to be country-and-western music, though sometimes it was a rapid rattle of Spanish or the hourly news. The local story seemed to be about the desecration of graves down in New Mexico. One here, one there, the reporters said; some new graves, some really old ones. Bodies dug up. Pieces left lying about. Yuck, Carol told herself, flipping the dial in search of something more uplifting.

When she stopped for gas in San Luis, almost at the New Mexico border, the attendant had his radio on, listening to some nosy reporter interviewing a recently bereaved, asking her how she felt about Daddy having been dug up.

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Carol shook her head in annoyance. How did the reporter expect the person felt about it!

"People're pretty upset 'bout that," the gas jockey said, shifting his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. "All those folks gettin' dug up down there, and the police not doin' nothin' to find out who's doin' it."

Carol nodded and tsked along with him, even though she thought most of what she'd heard so far was pretty foolish. She'd heard lots of crying and yelling and threats to sue, but there seemed to be more anger over having nobody to blame than there was over the people being dug up. One of the governor's aides had thoughtlessly advocated cremation as a way of avoiding such consequences, and a local religious group had taken up arms about it.

"So, that where you're goin'?" the attendant asked, evidently for the second time. "Down there 't New Mexico."

"Well, I'm really headed to Arizona. I'm going to find a nice warm retirement community and settle down." And about time, too, she thought, considering what she'd been through lately.

"Well, I hope you've got a reservation somewheres for tonight. It's tourist season, and places get pretty well filled up."

"I've got a sleeping bag," she told him. "I can always sleep in the car if I have to." Though, except for the first night after she'd left Richard, back in Missouri, she hadn't had to sleep in the car, and that had been for only a few hours. Mostly she'd been lucky enough to find clean, inexpensive motels. Clean enough, anyhow. So long as the beds were clean, ordinary bugs didn't bother her much. She kind of liked spiders, in fact. The way they ran along a wall, so busy. Not ants, though. Ants just overdid it.

He finished checking her oil and took the money she offered him. She waited patiently while he made change, thinking about the little graveyards she'd seen over the past few hours, peeling picket fences around them, lines of tottery crosses, lots of wreaths and bouquets of plastic flowers. People who kept up places like that wouldn't take to cremation. Some people needed a place to put the flowers.

"You have a nice day, now," he told her as she got back in her car. She intended to have a nice day. Lots of nice days from here on out, and the thought of all the things one could do in a nice day kept her so occupied she didn't even look at her map until she saw the sign at the New Mexico state line.

With a grunt of exasperation, she pulled to the side of the road and

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unfolded the map the gas-station man had given her. It was the first chance she'd had to check her route south of Colorado. "Land of Enchantment," the map said. "Visit New Mexico."

A few minutes' perusal made Carol realize she was going to visit more of New Mexico than she'd planned to. The Rio Grande River was flowing in the bottom of a deep gorge off somewhere to her right, and there was no way to get across it until she got down near Taos. At that point she'd find a road going northwest, through places called Tres Piedras and Tierra Amarilla. Carol rummaged up her high school Spanish and relished the roll of the syllables. It really was a pretty language. Well, the language was neither here nor there, and she should have continued on west from Fort Garland and not have turned south until she reached Alamosa. Or even Pagosa Springs.

"Dumb," she said to herself. "Just dumb." She always did things like that. Let herself in for things a smarter person would have stayed out of. Like marrying Richard. Like becoming a foster mother. Like getting stuck on her fiftieth birthday in Cooneyville, Colorado. Stuff like that. Her son Ben always said she didn't look before she leaped, and that was probably right. Too much leaping and not enough looking.

Well, no help for it. She might as well get along and enjoy the scenery. Not that there was much of what she would normally think of as scenery. The country seemed pretty short on trees and lakes and pretty things. On the flat, it was a lot of prickly stuff against far blue mountains. When she got into the hills, it was mostly tan grass and pinkish gray dirt and lots of dark, crouchy trees. Junipers, she thought. And some kind of fat little pine trees with short needles. Each one separated from the next one by a good bit. That was for water, probably, each one spreading out its roots to get as much of the scarce rainfall as it could. Polka-dot hills, they were, pinkish with dark dots. And a sky so blue it almost hurt to look at it. Carol guessed it was scenery, sort of, after you got used to it. Kind of took your breath out of you and left you hanging, breathing light.

She was pretty hungry by the time she got to Taos, so she stopped at a Lotaburger and took a seat at the counter next to a big, sweaty man with a neck too big for his shirt. Beyond him was a little, skinny woman who looked like she'd swallowed a watermelon, and then three big boys, like baby hippos dragged out of the river and propped at the counter. They were all eating huge double burgers and half-bushels of fries and drinking a gallon each of something sticky.

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"You'd think the people in this place could talk 'Merican, at least," the man said to Carol in a sneery tone. "My God, this whole state doesn't have one name you can pronounce." He gulped down a gobbet of burger. "That right, Glory?"

The skinny woman said that was right. She was definitely eating for two. There had to be another one of the baby hippos in there.

"Place is fulla forners," the man went on. "I mean, I ast you! Po-jo-a-que," he sneered. "How the hell you say that? And Ar-roy-o Se-co. How the hell you say that?"

Carol smiled a meaningless smile and ordered a burger and milk. While she waited, she read the Santa Fe paper somebody had left on the counter.

"This place, here," the man demanded in a loud voice. "How the hell you say the name of this place?"

"Lot-a-bur-ger," said Carol. "Just the way it's spelled."

He gave her a disgusted look. "Well, ain't you the smart-ass bitch. Nothin gives me a pain in the butt like you damn FEM-i-nists, buncha lezzes, always full of sass." He turned his back on her and went on chewing noisily. When Carol's food came, she took it and the paper to a booth beside the window where she could read in peace and look at her map again. She could go on down south to Albuquerque or Socorro and get to Flagstaff or Phoenix that way, but she'd always wanted to see the Four Corners country. All those buttes and twisty stone pillars. Just north of town was the turnoff to the bridge over the Rio Grande. She'd passed it on her way in. Well, that was all right. She'd needed lunch anyhow. She couldn't think of any reason not to go that way.

Except, she noticed in the paper she'd be headed right for the area where the graves had been dug up. Which wouldn't mean anything so far as she was concerned. Live people weren't at any risk from what she could tell.

So she'd head that way. If there wasn't anyplace to stay, she'd sleep in the car. She wasn't going to give up her chance to see Indian country just because of a little vandalism and possible discomfort.

She drank the last of her milk and went out to get into her car. The heavy man and his skinny wife and their three sons were just leaving in a huge silver RV with a little red wagon full of trail bikes on the back. They turned back up the road in the same direction she was going, and Carol waited awhile to let them get a good head start before she started her battered little Volkswagen and moved slowly out into the road.

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* * *

THAT AFTERNOON she drove through some very pretty mountains, ones with big, tall trees and a bit of water, not minding the roads a bit, even though the one north of Tierra Amarilla had been closed because of a bad truck pileup, and she had to detour south, through places called Coyote and Capulin and La Jara. She was just coming down a hill into desert country once more, when she rounded a corner and came up against the rear end of the huge silver RV with the red wagon full of trail bikes behind it. There was a whole string of cars coming the other way, and no room to pass. As soon as the last of the cars came past, the RV moved into the middle of the road. Almost as though he'd seen her back here. The road was flat, so he had to be doing it on purpose.

Carol slowed down, fell back, and just bumbled along, trying not to think about the RV or its occupants or the fact that she badly needed a bathroom. She passed a road sign that gave the mileage to the next town, then an intersection with a lonely motel showing a NO VACANCY sign out front, then another road sign saying, "Santuario Abandonado, 5 miles." The thought of a place to stop made her speed up a little, unthinkingly, and the distance between the Volks and the RV decreased.

A large sack came flying out of the window of the RV, and she braked sharply as it exploded to send cans bouncing off in all directions. The cans were followed by a flurry of paper wrappers and plastic sacks, blowing out into the surrounding desert. She slowed down again, opening a greater space between her and the road-hogging vehicle ahead, not quite quickly enough to avoid the cigar butt that bounced off her windshield and went off into the chaparral in a shower of sparks. At least she supposed it was chaparral. It looked as she had always imagined chaparral would look. Sort of resolutely unfriendly.

She turned her eyes away from the RV and onto the roadside. The next sign off to her right said, "Santuario, Food, Gas. 3 miles." Before her the RV trundled along very slowly, as though the driver were looking for something, still more or less in the middle of the road except when an oncoming car forced it into its own lane. Carol sighed and drummed on the steering wheel with her fingers. A derelict building came up on the right, its large sign so faded as to be almost unintelligible. The sun dropped behind a horizon-hugging line of clouds. Carol reflected that it wouldn't be long until dark. She'd definitely stop at Santu-whatever and see what offered itself. Let the

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creature in front of her go wherever he was going!

However, it seemed the RV driver had the same idea she did. He took the turnoff without hesitation and pulled across the gas pumps, effectively blocking access in either direction. After a moment's consideration, Carol drove around the corner of the store and parked out of sight. A few hundred feet in front of her car, well back into the desert, was one of the ubiquitous little fenced graveyards adjacent to a tumbled mass of adobe. She locked the car and went into the store, arriving there just before the skinny woman.

"Where's the RV park?" the skinny woman demanded of the girl behind the counter. "There's supposed to be an RV park back down the road."

The girl had brown skin and very long, glossy black hair. "There used to be one down the way you came, but it went out of business a few years back," she said politely, then turned toward Carol. "Help you, ma'am?"

"Just you finish with me first, missy," said the skinny woman in a nasty voice. "We've got to find a place to stay. If there's no RV park back there, where is the nearest one?"

"Up in Farmington, probably. I really don't know of one closer than that."

"That's miles from here! Clear up north! And we're going down to Kay-coe Canyon."

"Chah-co Canyon, ma'am. I'm sorry there's nothing closer, but there just isn't.

"Damn," said the skinny woman, stamping out of the place and trying to slam the door behind her. It had a closer on it and wouldn't slam, and that seemed to make her madder, because she glared at the door and kicked at it with one foot.

"Sure got her panties in a tangle," said the brown-skinned girl in a soft voice. "She acts like it's my fault the place closed up." She turned toward Carol and said, "Now, can I help you?"

Carol had decided there was no point going any farther tonight. "It looks like I'm going to have to spend the night in my car," she confided. "I need something to eat and drink, then I'd like to use the bathroom and have you tell me where I can park where I won't be in anybody's way or trespassing on private property or anything."

The girl looked over her shoulder, then shook her head and said quietly, "You don't want to stay around here."

"I don't?"

"No. You really don't. Nobody stays around here at night. I wouldn't stay

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around here at night."

"Why's that?" Carol asked curiously. "It doesn't look any different from anyplace else along the road."

The girl leaned across the counter and dropped her voice to a whisper. "This is El Abandonado. Santuario. The abandoned place. The abandoned church, really. Back there." She jerked her head toward the back wall. "Maybe you saw it when you parked your car. By the graveyard?"

"That pile of mud? Adobe, I mean?"

"That's it. That was the church of the Capuchins, you know."

Carol didn't know, but she nodded.

"That was where the Capuchino Canîbal was." The girl drew back with a portentous look, raised her eyebrows, and nodded significantly. "He's still there."

"Who?"

"The Capuchino Canîbal."

So far as Carol could recollect, cappuccino was a kind of coffee made with hot milk. Or maybe cold milk. With chocolate shavings on top. She settled herself with her elbows on the counter and asked, "What's a capuchino?"

"A monk!" the girl said, exasperated. "A friar. A Capuchin monk. They're kind of like Franciscans. They wear these hoods, with points, you know. And this one ate two of the other monks."

"Ate them! Alive?"

"Well, no; I guess they were dead. There was this blizzard, and nobody could get in or out for months, and these other two monks died, so the Capuchino Canîbal, he ate them."

"When was that?"

She thought about it. "I think it must have been a long time ago. There're a few stones out there in that cemetery with dates on them, and they're all before the 1800s, you know. I think maybe it was way before that, when the Spanish were sending missionaries all through here. Anyhow, nobody buries anybody there anymore. In fact, nobody's been burying bodies anywhere around here lately, not since El Canîbal started digging them up to eat them."

"That's what he does?" said Carol in dismay.

"That's what he does. He was cursed!"

"Who cursed him?"

"I don't know. Nobody ever said who."

"He eats the bodies in the graveyard back behind here, does he?"

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"Well, no. Not that graveyard. He can't get in there. That's consecrated ground. But he's been eating people buried in unconsecrated ground, all up and down this road. That's what all the fuss is about."

"So, if I were going to stay here tonight, the best place for me to stay would be in the graveyard, right?"

"You're crazy," said the brown-skinned girl, shaking her head at Carol with an exasperated expression. "Honestly, lady, I wouldn't stay there for a million dollars."

"But it would be safe."

She thought about this, running her fingers through her thick, straight black hair. "Well, I suppose it would be safe. But, honestly. . . ."

The door shuddered open, and the thick-necked man came in. "J'you tell my wife there wasn't any RV park near here? What the hell, you can't read a map? Right here on the map!"

"It closed," said Carol firmly. "The well water was no good, and some people died of a horrible disease, so the health department closed them down."

"I want an answer from you, I'll ask for it," snarled the man, turning back to the girl. "You can't read a map? Is that it?"

"The well water had something in it, the people died of a horrible disease, so they got closed down," said the brown-skinned girl with a straight face.

"Shee-it," said the thick-necked man. "Shee-it!" He went out again, yelling to his wife or sons or both. "Might as well start supper, Glory; there ain't no camp!"

In a moment, Carol heard the sound of the trail bikes starting up, screaming like chain saws, then they slammed by the front of the store, two, three, four of them, down the side of the building and off into the desert.

"They're not supposed to ride those things around here," whispered the girl. "The desert is very fragile. Those things tear it up. And they kill the animals."

Carol shook her head sadly. "I know. But I'm afraid that family doesn't know how to do anything else. You ever notice that about some families? Stinks, trash, and noise is all they can make." She shook her head sadly. "And babies."

"How come you told them that, about the well being bad?"

"I guess just to stop him from yelling. It gives me a headache when people yell like that."

"Men like that scare me. Men who poke you with their finger and call you girlie and stuff. All the time angry and looking at me as though they

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wanted to either hit me or take my clothes off." She sighed and combed her hair with her fingers once more. "You're not really going to stay here tonight, are you?"

"If your cannibal only digs up dead bodies, he shouldn't be interested in me at all."

"Well, there're some say people die from fear, just seeing him. There've been a few people camped along here that had what they called heart attacks. But Billy—he's my boyfriend—he talked to the patrol guy that found some of them, and he says they didn't look like people with heart attacks. They looked just plain scared!"

"Well, different people are scared of different things. Me, for instance. I don't mind spiders or snakes, but I just hate ants! Probably those people heard an owl in the night, and it scared them." She smile comfortingly at the girl. "What I really need is to use the bathroom here and get something to eat, and for you not to worry a bit about me. That's one thing my kids always say: you don't need to worry about Mom." That wasn't quite the way Martha and Lucky and Ben had put it, but close enough. "I'll sleep out there in the graveyard and nobody will bother me a bit."

The brown-skinned girl looked doubtful, but she didn't argue. After discussing the available menu, Carol settled on a barbecue-beef sandwich heated up in the microwave, some nachos, a package of Twinkies for dessert, and a six-pack of beer, though she knew she wouldn't be able to drink more than one. She used the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and gave herself a sponge bath with paper towels — at least all the parts that had been exposed to the dust during the day. By the time she was as clean and neat as possible, the girl was ready to shut up the place, so Carol went out front with her while she turned off the lights, locked the doors, and got into an old pickup that was almost as battered as Carol's bug.

"Somebody still in that RV?" the girl asked, pointing to a small light in the window.

"The man's wife," said Carol. "That was Daddy and the three boys on the trail bikes."

"There're signs all along here that say no off-road vehicles," the girl said angrily. "All along here."

"Well, maybe he reads only signs he wants to read," Carol said. "You go on home now. Where is home?"

"Dulce," she said, pointing off to the north. "That's the Apache reservation

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up there. Jicarilla."

"See you in the morning," said Carol, not wanting to ask what a heecahreeya was.

"I hope so," said the brown-skinned girl, looking a little doubtful about it. "You sleep tight now. And you be careful." She tried to start the car. A brief grinding sound was followed by silence.

"Oh shit," the girl said in a whisper. "Oh damn."

"Is your battery dead?"

"I don't think so. I mean, yes, but the problem's in the generator. My boyfriend told me I had to get it fixed. I just hadn't gotten round to it."

"Is there someone you can call for help?"

"I can call my boyfriend, but he's going to yell at me."

Carol shrugged. "You're welcome to stay with me, out in the graveyard."

The girl shuddered, got out of the car, and unlocked the store. She went to the store phone, dialed, and waited for someone to answer. Carol stood politely at the door to keep her company without intruding on her privacy. Finally someone answered, and Carol heard one side of a muttered conversation.

The girl hung up and came back to the door, head hanging, hands thrust deep into the pockets of her jeans jacket. "He can't come get me. That was his mom. He's working for his cousin tonight at the reservation motel in Dulce."

"Is he an Apache?" asked Carol, remembering that Apache were supposed to be exceptionally fierce. Though maybe that wasn't true any longer.

"Yeah. So'm I. His mom says she'll tell him when he gets in, but it'll be midnight or after."

"We could stay in here," suggested Carol, gesturing at the surrounding shelves and counters.

"This isn't consecrated." The girl shivered. "If I've got to stay anywhere near here, I'd rather take my chances in the graveyard. I'll have to come back over here around midnight, though. Billy's coming for me about then."

"Do you have any blankets?" Carol asked. Her sleeping bag wasn't really large enough for two.

There were blankets in the back room. "For emergencies," said the girl as she brought three of them out to Carol's car, not specifying what such emergencies might be. She went back to get a sandwich and container of milk for herself, and was just getting into the VW, when the trail bikes came roaring back, spewing clouds of reeking blue exhaust and skidding to a stop in

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a great cloud of dust.

"I suppose we should tell them," said the girl, coughing as she tried to wave the exhaust fumes away. She looked doubtfully at Carol. "Shouldn't we warn them?"

"About the cannibal?" Carol shook her head. "We can try to warn them, I suppose, but I don't think it will do any good. I'll do it. No point in your getting yelled at again."

She knocked on the door of the RV while the man and his sons were still occupied with their bikes. The woman answered, saying, "Yeah. Whadda you want?"

Carol cleared her throat. "The young lady and I are spending the night here, and we'll be sleeping over in the old graveyard. We think it's the safest place. You're welcome to join us."

"You crazy'r something? What you anglin' for? You want somethin' to eat, is that it?"

"I've eaten, thank you."

"Well, you can take your advice on what's safe and what's not safe out of here! You're some kind of joke, you know that? Expecting people to sleep in a graveyard? What're you, some kinda Satanist. . . ."

"Whadda ya want?" demanded the man from behind Carol. "Whudda ya want?"

Carol repeated her invitation, emphasizing the word "safe."

He sneered at her. "Well, you and the little squaw can sleep wherever you want. Lezzes like you prob'ly get off on that, but you leave my fambly alone. I'll decide where's safe to sleep. My God, this whole place is full of lezzes an' loonies an' forners! Otta run you all out and give the place to the 'Mericans."

Carol went back to her car, retaining as much dignity as possible under the hoots and catcalls from the baby hippos who had formed an instant attachment to the words "lezzes" and "loonies."

"They're awful," said the girl. "Just awful. You know, I get this kind of vision sometimes when I'm real tired. I dream the whole world is full of men like that and boys like that and skinny little women with squinched-up lips and round stomachs making more big fat white men like that. And I see them riding trail bikes and snowmobiles over the whole world, and throwing out beer cans and cutting down all the trees and shooting animals until there aren't any left. . . ."

"None left at all!" said Carol. "That's dreadful." She shook her head sadly, recognizing the vision as similar to one she herself had had from time to time.

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"It gets to me sometimes," said the girl sadly.

They drove the few hundred feet to the graveyard and parked beside the tumbled wall of the old church. Though only part of the cemetery fence was still there, Carol could see where it had been.

"Everything inside where the fence was is consecrated, right?" Carol asked. She wasn't sure what consecrated meant, but she was sure it implied a kind of protection. Some kind of religious spell had been put on it.

The girl nodded, seeming in no hurry to move. They sat while the light faded, listening to the night sounds — far-off hootings and the yip yip yip of a coyote. All the lights went on in the RV, and they smelled onions cooking.

Carol took her flashlight out of the glove box and got out of the car. "There's a good, level spot over there between those two graves," she said as she dragged her ground cloth and sleeping bag from the trunk. They made their way across a fallen section of fence to a flat place between two old stones. It looked almost as though someone had slept there before, since scarcely a pebble showed on the smooth soil when Carol lit it with the flash. The ground cloth went first, with the unzipped sleeping bag on top, then the blankets on top of that. Enough of the ground cloth remained on either side to pull over them in case it rained, which seemed unlikely. The girl sat on the makeshift bed to eat her sandwich, then stretched out beside Carol, squirming to find a comfortable position. They talked about nothing much until a sleepy silence fell between them.

In just a few moments, Carol heard a little snore from next to her. Ah, the resiliency of youth. Carol could remember falling asleep like that. *A well-worked body and a clear conscience*—that's what her grandmother used to say about sleep. Carol settled herself and concentrated on a black spot on a black wall. Usually that worked like a charm, but tonight it didn't, probably because of the country-and-western music screaming from the RV at top volume. At last, after a couple of hours, the noise stopped, and the black spot turned inside out and swallowed her.

WHEN SHE woke, she knew at once it was the middle of the night and that something had wakened her. Some sound. Some presence. Turning slowly on the hard earth, she searched the darkness, listening carefully. Nothing. No, something. Something . . . someone leaning on the cemetery fence.

She sat up, wrapping the edge of the ground cloth around her legs. "Good

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evening," she said.

"Good evening," said the shadow beside the fence. "A pleasant evening, isn't it?"

"Not too cold," Carol responded. "But not too hot, either."

"No rain," said the shadow in a regretful tone. "Or snow. Either of which would soften the earth. The soil gets very hard when it's dry like this."

"Right." She settled herself more comfortably and, for a vagrant moment, wished that she smoked. It seemed such a perfect time for a cigarette. Or maybe merely for lighting a match. The night seemed darker than it had before.

"Nights like this are rather nice for walking, though," said the shadow, turning slightly so that she saw its hooded head silhouetted against the stars. "Peaceful."

"Are you the one they call the Capuchino Canibal?" asked Carol.

"Brother Bernard, he said reproachfully. "Please."

"You ate some of your brothers," she said, determined upon verification. "Your fellow . . . monks."

"Only two of them," he replied. "And not even all of either one. Just enough to get by until the thaw."

"Were you damned?" she asked curiously. "Is that why you're hanging around?"

"I wasn't damned." he said indignantly. "I confessed; I received absolution. That wasn't it at all. What happened was, one of my . . . colleagues had an aunt who was a *curandera,* and she cursed me."

"What was she?"

"A *curandera,* a witch."

"What kind of curse was it?"

"The usual kind. Doomed to hang around here forever, until I can find something good to do that outweighs what I did to her nephew."

"From what the news has been saying, it seems you're still hungry."

"Wouldn't you be?" he demanded. "Oh, I was in a fine fever of resolution at first, seeking good deeds, staying away from all fleshly temptations. I managed to stay dedicated until this spring, as a matter of fact, but after all that time.... Well, how would you like to hang around on the desert for a few hundred years or so with no conversation, nothing to drink. . . ."

"I've got some beer you can have," said Carol. "I was going to drink another bottle at bedtime, but I forgot it. It's in the car. Feel free."

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The shadow wandered over to her car. Somehow it managed to get a bottle of beer without opening the door. Extoplasmic penetration, no doubt, Carol thought, as she settled herself more firmly on her sleeping bag and listened to the faint glugging across the fence.

"This is very good! I prefer wine, actually, though heaven knows there's little enough of that out here in this wilderness. I never thought of drinking beer, though there's probably a good deal of it around."

"So now you're back to eating people," said Carol. "Bodies, at least. Dozens of them."

The shadow seemed to be considering her comment. "Not dozens," it said mildly. "Certainly not dozens. Fifteen or twenty, perhaps. And it's not as though there were any shortage of them, you know. Not like tucking into an endangered species, like whales — which would probably taste better!"

"Really?" asked Carol in a faint voice. "Humans don't taste good?"

"No, most of them certainly do not, as I've learned to my dismay. I avoid old people for the most part. They tend to be stringy or flabby. And spinsters leave a bitter aftertaste. I've learned not to touch anyone who spent his life thinking too much. Social activists and environmentalists are the worst. All that concern affects the flesh, lends it a certain . . ." He thumped his breastbone with the side of his fist. ". . . acidity." His voice drifted off thoughtfully before beginning again:

"The best ones are the chunky ones, particularly the young ones. You can almost always tell they're going to be good if they died doing something macho."

"Macho?"

"Yes, you know. Like racing horses, maybe. Every now and then, the local cowboys come tearing through here in bunches, whooping and hollering. Or people on trail rides get to seeing who can get there first. Or young Indians, showing off. I love to hear them coming. A few have been killed every year, and when I get them up, they're very tasty, very muscular with a nice marbling of solid fat, and the flavor is almost always uncorrupted by thought." the ghoul nodded his head slowly against the stars. "A pleasant sensation, comparatively speaking."

"You sound very . . . modern," Carol commented. "Up-to-date."

"Television," said the shadow. "I watch a lot of television. I stand outside a lot of windows at night, watching TV."

"Ah," said Carol. Beside her on the sleeping bag, the girl stirred restlessly.

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Carol patted her shoulder and whispered, "Everything's all right." In a moment the girl settled down and began breathing deeply once more.

Carol asked, "I suppose you'd give it up, if you could get free of the curse."

"Give up what? Eating bodies? Believe me, most bodies are no joy. Compared to . . . oh, say, roast turkey or chicken or a good pork chop with cream gravy and biscuits. I'm convinced that Heaven is going to be fried pork chops with cream gravy!" He shook his head sadly. "No, with rare exceptions, ghouling isn't all it's made out to be."

"You really think they'll have pork chops in Heaven?"

"I thought . . . perhaps in Heaven, people had no appetites at all. No, ah . . . fleshiness."

The shadow leaned back against the fence on his elbows and looked up at the stars. "I used to think that. After I became a ghoul, though, I had time to consider such questions. Many of the things I'd always taken for granted simply didn't stand up to examination. You take all a man's appetites away, and what's left wouldn't be worth putting in Heaven. All man's pleasures come from one appetite or another, one kind of hunger or another kind. Take all man's hungers away, and what's a Heaven for?"

They sat in companionable silence while Carol considered what he had said.

"Is a monk like a priest?" she asked after a while.

"Some monks are priests," he answered. "I was."

"You could do . . . oh, last rites and things like that?"

"I could."

"The fact that you ate your brethren, that wouldn't keep you from doing last rites, would it?"

"I told you," said the shadow stiffly. "I received absolution."

"For what sin?" Carol asked curiously. "Murder?"

"Of course not. I didn't kill them. The blizzard killed them. If I was guilty of anything, my confessor said it was gluttony."

"I suppose . . . the people who have died of fright around here recently, that wouldn't have been murder, either, would it?"

"If some people have simply dropped dead because they caught an unexpected glimpse of me, it was not my fault," said the ghoul stiffly. "It was not intentional, and I feel no sense of responsibility."

Carol thought about that awhile. "Tell me, can you . . . ah, can you go through walls?"

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The shadow thought about it, nodding. "I've done it, so, yes. Yes, I can."

"You went through metal in my car."

"It's no worse than plaster. I've gone through plaster. And stone."

The girl turned restlessly once more, sighing, murmuring, "Billeeee, don't . . ." Then she giggled lubriciously.

"Lust," said the shadow in a reflective tone. "I'd almost forgotten lust. I'm sure there's lust in Heaven, too. All earth's sins will be Heaven's joys. And about time." He sighed. "Why did you ask about the metal? And last rites?"

"Just an idea I had. A good deed you could do, to take the curse off."

"Really?" he laughed. "After searching for several centuries, I've about given up hope of that!"

"I really have thought of a good deed."

"So?"

"So . . . sort of tit for tat," she said. "I do you a favor, you do me one."

He thought about this, still staring at the stars. "Nothing sinful."

She considered this. "Well, I'm pretty sure not sinful. At least, no more sinful than you've been doing right along, but, I mean, you can't help that. You've been cursed."

"True," the ghoul said reflectively. "Alas, true. Very well, it's a bargain."

"O.K., here's your part of the bargain. In a little while, there's going to be a young man come for this girl. He'll drive up over there at the store. I'm going to walk her over there, and you're not to frighten her, or her boyfriend, or even try to frighten me. Understood?"

"I don't think I'd have done that anyhow."

"Well, just in case. Then, when she's gone, I'll tell you what I promised, but you're not ever to bother her or her boyfriend, or me, not later tonight, not ever. You promise that, and I'll tell you what you can do to take the curse off."

The ghoul took a long time to think about this. "I suppose," he said at last. "Agreed."

There was something not altogether sincere in his voice. "Swear," said Carol. "On your immortal soul."

He made a gesture of annoyance. "Oh, very well. I swear on my immortal soul not to bother you or the girl. It's just that she looks so very . . . plump. . . ."

"I know how she looks! Swear! Not her, not her boyfriend! The three of us!"

". . . or her boyfriend. The three of you."

Carol sighed. It had been just in time. She could see the headlights slowing along the road right now. The car stopped by the store, and someone bellowed,

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"Maaah-reee."

Carol shook the brown-skinned girl awake. "Come on, honey," she said. "Mary, your boyfriend's here to get you."

With the girl only half-awake, Carol led her through the fence and across the hard-packed earth to the store, the beam of her flashlight making a path before them. The boy saw the beam and came running.

"Wha' th' hell she doing out here?" he cried. "Don' she know the. . . ."

"It's all right," said Carol. "You take her home now, and she'll probably tell you all about it."

The shadow was in attendance. Carol could feel him off to one side, watching the three of them. She waited until the car had gone, then walked slowly back to the graveyard, detouring slightly so she could walk closely along the side of the RV, past the wagon with the trail bikes. The smell of onions still lingered. So did the shadow. She heard him sniffing behind her.

"Did you ever consider," she asked, "how much better ordinary foods taste when they're eaten very fresh?"

"Fresh?" whispered the shadow. "You mean, like fruit?"

"Like that, I suppose. More like oysters."

"You mean alive."

"I guess I mean like lobsters." Carol shuddered delicately. "What I'm getting at, when one wants a lobster dinner, one doesn't stand about waiting for a lobster to die of old age. . . ."

"Or fall off a horse," mused the shadow.

"No."

There was a long, brooding silence.

The shadow was standing beside the trail bikes. "These little vehicles are very noisy," the shadow said. "People regard them as . . . macho. I've noticed that."

"They tear up the desert a good deal," Carol said. "And they smell."

"Eliminating that would be almost. . . ."

"A public service," Carol supplied.

"A public service," the ghoul repeated. "Yes."

"Definitely a good deed," Carol said firmly. "Any ecologist would agree."

"I'm sure," said the shadow thoughtfully, running his fingers back and forth on the side of the RV, making a high, keening sound like a fingernail on a chalkboard.

Carol walked steadily back to the graveyard, leaving the ghoul behind. She

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curled up under the blankets, drawing a corner of the ground cloth over her head, and shut her eyes firmly, thinking of a black spot on a black wall. This time, it worked like a charm, and she fell asleep at once.

Something woke her in the predawn hour. "Carol, Carol," called softly in the darkness.

"How did you know my name?" Carol asked.

"On your car registration," said the ghoul in a quiet voice that almost purred with satisfaction. "Seemed improper not to know your name since you know mine."

"Right," she yawned, sitting up and pulling the ground cloth around her.

"Pleasant morning," said the ghoul.

Long silence. Far off on the horizon, a pale line showed itself. Somewhere in the desert, a bird called, a sleepy tu-wheep, tu-wheep.

"I rather thought it would be appropriate for someone to move that vehicle," said the shadow. "Before that nice plump girl comes to work. You wouldn't want her upset."

"Ah," said Carol. "I do hope you remembered last rites."

"I'm not unaware of my calling," the shadow said firmly. "I kept it in mind." He gaped a self-satisfied yawn, displaying a number of very long yellow teeth.

Carol turned her face away and breathed deeply. She had his promise, she reminded herself.

"How many?" the shadow asked. "How many will it take to remove the curse, do you think?"

Carol thought about it. "One would have to make a significant impact," she said. "I should think at least a few dozen. . . ."

"More likely a hundred or so," mused the shadow. "Or more." He did not sound dismayed. "You were right about their being better fresh. There's no comparison. And I was thinking, in the winter, there are the ones on snowmobiles. Nasty things, snowmobiles." He picked his teeth with a long fingernail and nodded thoughtfully. "It may take more than a hundred. But however long it takes, one must follow one's conscience . . . ."

As the light along the horizon intensified, his voice faded away.

Carol waited for a few moments, just to be sure he was gone, then got up purposefully, folded up the sleeping bag, the ground cloth, and the blankets and put them in the car. Then she put on her gloves and approached the RV. There was no sound at all from inside, and it wasn't locked. The keys were in the ignition. She'd never driven anything this large, but there was no other

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traffic on the road, so it didn't matter if she wobbled a bit. She turned the bulky vehicle back the way it had come, and drove a little more than a mile down the road until she came to the faded sign on which the words "E-Z Rest RV Camp" could barely be made out. She parked behind the sign. Briefly, she thought of separating the drawn curtain and peeking in the back, but then decided against it. Leftovers were always messy.

She locked the truck with the keys inside, then looked at her watch. She'd have to hike back to the store briskly, or someone might arrive before she got there.

As it was, she was in front of the store, unloading the blankets from her own car, when Mary arrived with her boyfriend.

"They left?" the girl yawned, gesturing at the place the RV had been parked.

"Yes, shortly after you did," Carol agreed. "Almost immediately after you did, in fact. Are you going to get your car fixed?"

"Billy brought his tools," she said, looking under her eyelashes at the stocky youth who had already raised the hood of the battered truck and was tinkering with its innards. "Did you sleep O.K.?"

"Fine," said Carol, settling herself to get on with her journey. "Except for him, you know, the cannibal." She started the car.

"God," the girl said in a hushed voice, leaning in the window. "Did you see him?"

"Yes. He spoke to me. He said he would not under any circumstances bother you. So you don't need to be afraid anymore."

"Why me?"

"I think . . . it must be he sees how hardworking and conscientious you are, and he wanted to put your mind at rest."

The girl stepped back, shaking her head in doubt.

Carol nodded encouragingly. "He was a priest, you know. He appreciates goodness."

Which was certainly true, in one sense or another.

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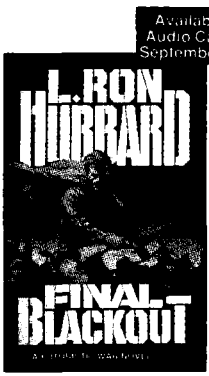

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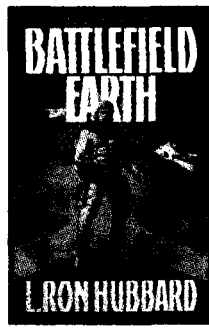

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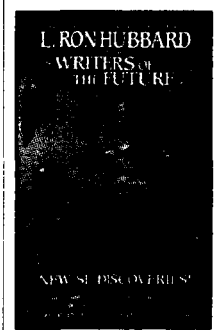

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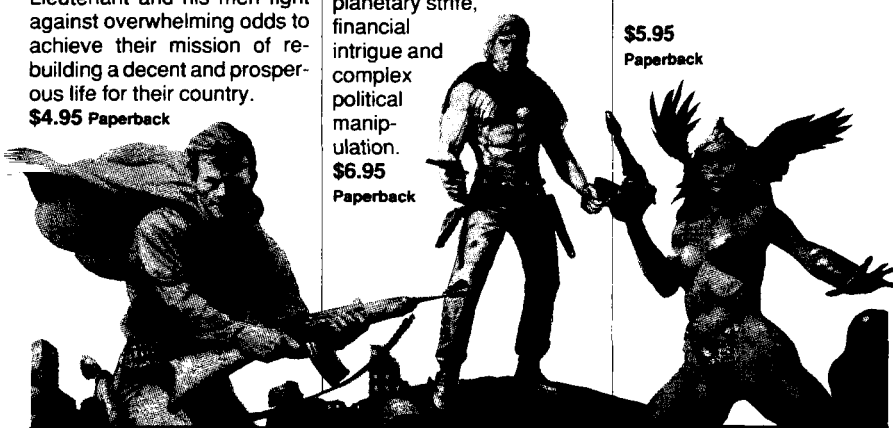

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Slow Freight, F.M. Busby, Bantam, $4.99

The Fire Within, Graham Watkins, Berkley, $5.50

BOTH OF this month's books are original paperbacks. The point of that remark will be made clear, in time. Meanwhile:

F.M. Busby, much better known as Buzz, has been writing books for some time, now, especially the Rissa Kerguelen series. But it just goes to show you; specifically because he is a friend of mine, since 1961, and because I first met him as a fan, I haven't been paying enough attention to his writing. I now regret that, by a considerable margin. Because instead of my telling you that we have found a new writer with considerable potential, I get to tell you about this old writer with considerable potential realized. And that is not as much fun.

But if I know Buzz — and I presume that I do — he won't mind too much. And I really like the typo on the back page of his Bantam original; he ought to have written *The Demo Trilogy*. But what the hell.

The thing about Busby is that he holds degrees in physics and electrical engineering, and spent some time in Alaska working with these things. So that writing is a second career for him. That threw me off. But now I have found out: I don't know how he is as a physicist or an electrical engineer, but as a writer, we need more like him. He's good, he has a splendid imagination, and he writes a kind of science fiction that is scarce. Case in point, *Slow Freight*.

Slow Freight begins with the crude demonstration, not too many years from now, of traction drive, a space drive which does not use reaction mass. Unfortunately, the first few times it is tried, it turns out to be working against time, rather than space, and the first thing that happens is that Anne Portaris, one of the demonstrators, gets to be called Three Fingered

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Annie from then on. But they get it tuned, and from then on it is a space drive.

Second, Dr. Habegger sets out to demonstrate matter transmission, and Rance Collier, too poor to go on with his physics studies, and turned PR man, gets to set up the press conference and associated doodads. Only, though Habegger sets various objects on the transmission stage, and they vanish, and all that, they don't appear in the receiving stage. So the press conference is cancelled.

In the two years that follow, all sorts of things and people vanish into the receiving stage, despite security guards. (Nobody dares turn the thing off, especially after Dr. Habegger himself disappears into it. Also, it turns out they *can't* turn if off; it keeps right on humming along after an accidental power loss.) Finally, the university where Habegger was working turns it into a garbage dump. Which proves embarrassing when all the objects begin appearing in the receiving stage. The blessed thing works fine; the only hitch is a two-year waiting period, which, it turns out, is imperceptible to people or objects in it. As far as Habegger is concerned, for instance, he stepped in and the next instant stepped out.

Furthermore, it's always two years, no matter how far apart the terminals are. So, the next thing is to build a starship.

You follow me? With a Habegger terminal on board, the ship can be supplied with fuel and supplies in a continuous stream, from Earth. Crews can be rotated. Speeds just below that of light are possible; time dilation takes care of a lot of the apparent forty-year distance between Earth and the star the ship — the Starfinder — is sent to. (That this is actually an old idea of Poul Anderson's is not, I think, a difficulty; Busby brings many new things to it, and Anderson can afford to be generous at any rate.) And very little can go wrong. Right?

Well, you know the answer to that one. But by piling one logical development after another on the traction drive and Habegger device, Busby works it so that by the time you get to the end, 311 closely-set pages later, you have been a lot of places, and done a lot of things.

You really have. Busby sweeps you off your feet, keeps you pretty much swept off at all times, tells a story with a very large cast well, and makes you a definite part of the action. And I haven't even told you about the Liij, nor will I, beyond noting that they operate a half-million year old starship that cruises far faster than light. I mean, why confuse this review, right?

Certainly. But, in all truth,

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though at times Busby verges on piling on one wonder too many, he never does, quite. I think you will enjoy this book a good deal, admittedly especially if you are a superscience fan. I don't know if you are; I am. When the superscience is done right, which means I'm not a superscience fan as often as I might be.

Most of the story is told through the eyes of Rance Collier, who, by a series of not-quite-unbelievable events, keeps turning up in places where the main action is going on, including *Starfinder* and the ships which have to deal with the Liij ship's going to swallow the Moon ... ah, but I said I wasn't going to mention the Liij again; ah, well, so much for my reputation for undeviating probity. Anyway, Rance does considerable growing up in the course of this book, which finds time to weave in his personal story, and rather well, too.

I also liked one other feature of this book which, strictly speaking, didn't have to exist for the mere sake of making the book readable. It would certainly have done just as well without it. But this book doesn't have many genuine villains in it. It has a villain who acts villainous — Old Iron Tits — but, in the end, that turns out to be a chemical imbalance which, when corrected, leaves the said lady a far calmer person and, furthermore, essentially in the situation she would have been in if her villainous plans had matured villainously.

And this is only the extreme example of this sort of thing; the only people who stay villainous are too minor to bother redeeming. The people in Busby's universe are, by and large, a *decent* lot, without being wimps, and in the end almost invariable decency wins out.

That's nice, right?

Before we go on ...

Many, now many columns ago, while reviewing *Nightfall*, by Asimov and Silverberg (as distinguished from "Nightfall," by Asimov, but actually the criticism was intended to apply to both versions), I said something stupid and Rick Norwood caught me at it. Actually, I repeated something numerous sources had told me; all of us were stupid. I said that if you were down at the bottom of a well, even in broad daylight, you would see stars. I have believed this since I first ran across it in a science book at about the age of ten, and various equally "scientific" places have repeated it for me over the years. Norwood pointed out to me that the Rayleigh scattering would occur no matter where you were on the Earth, and that, without respect to the other circumstances which

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make the story of *Nightfall* a matter of faith rather than a matter of science, you do not see stars, no matter how deep the well.

Well, naturally, once somebody has pointed it out, it's obvious. I thank Rick Norwood, and I apologize for having let so many columns go by before I remembered to relay this news to you, and, I additionally thank Isaac for not putting his boot into me.

But we were talking about original paperbacks.

One day not too long ago, my mail disgorged the following communication:

Aldis Budrys
The Magazine of Fantasy and Sci-Fi
Box 56
Cornwall, CT 06753

Dear Aldis Budrys,

I know this is not the way these things are normally done.

Normally, if you want to get a book reviewed, you send a copy of the book; normally, it comes from the publisher, not the author. Normally, I'm going to presume, you don't review paperback originals.

No wait! Don't wad me up and toss me just yet!

Ah, good. Now; let me explain why (quickly). My book, THE FIRE WITHIN, is an April pub from Berkley, and on the spine it says horror. Maybe so. There're a lot of other categories it could have been stuck in, that's for sure; we aren't talking about a Freddy Kruger. The story is grounded (accurately, I might add) in Aztec myth and religion, a sort of an exotic topic for American readers, but one that speaks strongly to a number of different issues, and, perhaps more importantly, has the ability to appeal to different people at different levels. Now, I'm not going to go on and on about the book (other than to say it is truly magnificent, impossible to lay down, etc., and I have no prejudices whatever . . .!) because what I propose to do is offer you a copy for review purposes.

Why didn't I just send one? Because I know you. You would have said "Agh, paperback original!" and trashed it. True? You know it is. But it's the words that count, isn't it, not the cover?

. . . .

Graham Watkins

And he enclosed a reply form, once again giving my name as Aldis Budrys.

Now, there are a lot of different ways to respond to this sort of letter, which, in one variation or another I get one of about once a year. Most of the time I just ignore them. But this one . . . .

See, it's not just that he got my name wrong when all logic declares that you check it carefully. It's that he claimed to know me and my prejudice against paperback originals, not knowing, or caring, that every one of my novels except *Michaelmas* has been a paperback original, not caring or knowing that I am one of the three Directors of the annual Philip K. Dick Award

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for the best American paperback original — and the one who actually hands the recipient the check — nor even checking back at, say, a mere year's worth of these columns. He was just taking his idea of his best shot at getting the book reviewed, and it occurred to me he would have been hard put to it to have done a more unfortunate job of it. Except for one thing; if he hadn't written me his letter, I in truth would *not* have reviewed his novel, because it struck me, when I first saw it, that it had a cover that told me nothing, and a back cover that promised "erotic fantasies," of which I already have a store bigger than anybody really needs. And the headline, THE EPIC HORROR NOVEL OF THE YEAR!, struck me as mendacious on the face of it. So, as I said, I would not have reviewed it.

But he wrote me this letter. And I decided to write him back, straightening him out on a few things, and inviting him to send me the book anyway, I having meanwhile gone back to an address different from the one where I get most of my review copies, and where his book had originally come — and gone to the second hand book store.

Well, sir, it was fifty-fifty whether he would, but he did. And he explained to me, in all sobriety, that he did indeed know my name, and was familiar with my column; it was all his computer's fault, or the fault of the Horror Writers of America — anyone but his — and here was the book, and God bless me.

All would have been well. I read about half the book, and it is, indeed, fraught with erotic scenes, and it isn't badly written, with the exception of the fact that I found myself on about Page 300 with the firm convictions that (A) only about 150 pages worth of events had gone by, and (B) under the circumstances, since I really didn't think this was the EPIC HORROR NOVEL of this or any other year, I wasn't likely to get to Page 556 in any finite length of time. (Page 556 being the end.)

For what it's worth, it sets up an interesting situation in which a small number of North Americans get shifted to the coast of Mexico, whereupon the Aztec gods set about perturbing their lives big time, instead of the small ways in which they have been doing it up to now. (I can't imagine, by the way, what category but horror this novel belongs in. Perhaps I missed something.) But, as I said, this means that the first 186 pages of the book are setup; the story doesn't really get going until then, and this is far too long. Nor is this pace much stepped up thereafter. This really is a book that would have been im-

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proved immeasurably by having every other page ripped out, in which case you would see that it is ingenious, truly horrible in the good sense of the word, and, except for the eroticism — which I frankly think is there largely for a different kind of thrill, rather than to advance the story — above all, as it must be, fast-paced.

But the printed version is not fast-paced. Oh, no, no, no. And the printed version is what I am reviewing.

One more thing. This book bears endorsements of Rex Miller, Ramsey Campbell, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Gene Lazuta, Andrew Neiderman, and Richard Laymon (twice). Among other things, it means Berkley circulated the manuscript extensively, since there is no other way it could have gathered outside opinion. But, as I suspected even before I read it, I still suspect: I doubt very much that all these people actually read the book all the way through. It just doesn't figure. Surely Marion Zimmer Bradley, for instance, has better things to do with her time.

Be careful how you rub my lamp.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

A Bridge of Years, Robert Charles Wilson (Doubleday/Foundation, cloth, 333pp, $20)

SOME BOOKS have sizzle, and some books have class. Some even have sizzle *and* class, but that's almost a matter of dumb luck, because when authors try for sizzle, their books almost never have class, and when they try for class, it's pretty rare for their books to end up spitting hot.

Robert Charles Wilson doesn't seem to try for either, but *A Bridge of Years* has both, and it's hard to imagine what kind of reader who has had any experience of life at all could read this book without realizing that in it there is beauty, and in it there is truth.

There are times when I wonder whether Robert Charles Wilson even *has* to try. Maybe what he does is as easy to him as breathing. Certainly he never makes *us* see the trouble he goes to in creating stories like this. The tale begins sharply, with the murder of a gentle keeper of a time station by a techno-soldier from some dark future. But instead of going on with that story, Wilson moves us to the much quieter story of Tom Winter, whose brother, Tony, has brought him to this small Seattle-area town to help him recover from the devastating collapse of his marriage and his career. Here Tom finds himself surrounded by decent people, mostly, or at least people who want to be decent; here he also finds himself the new owner of an isolated house that seems to clean itself.

He leaves dirty dishes on the table, and in the morning they're spotlessly clean. He tries to videotape to see what's happening during the night, but promptly at 3:45 A.M. all the lights go out, and when they come back on the room is clean. There are several neat, polished holes in the basement foundation, and he starts dreaming that strange metallic bugs are leaving the house during the night, streaming out into the woods behind the yard.

All the time he's trying to deal with these events, he's also trying to please his older brother by hold-

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ing down a job at his automobile dealership, but he just can't stand to make a living by squeezing the last dime out of people who don't have that many dimes to start with. He's a lot more comfortable with the real estate agent who sold him the house, a man he remembers from his growing-up years as a real trouble-making kid who threw rocks at cars. The personality that once made trouble is now more akin to Tom Winter's own than his brother is.

At times it feels like a mainstream character study (but a good one!); at times it feels like a ghost story, which in a sense it is, though the ghost is quite resurrectable; but what it finally becomes is a love story, not about romance, but about healing, about coming to terms with solitude, about finding your own life instead of trying to act out other people's scripts for you.

All the sizzle you could ever hope for is here, and all the class. What drives them both is a storyteller of astonishing compassion and understanding, whose characters matter to us because they are as complicated and contradictory and hungry and frightened as the people we know best — and because they are also as generous and forgiving and brave as we wish we were, as we try to be, as we hope that, in our best moments, we already are.

Sorcerer's Son, Phyllis Eisenstein (UK: Grafton, cloth, 379pp, £12.95; US: NAL, paper)

Sorcerer's Son was not one of the heavily hyped books of 1989, the year it came out. The reader who brought it to my attention couldn't even remember seeing it reviewed anywhere. Yet it has found an audience that has kept it quietly, steadily selling copies ever since then — a remarkable feat in an era when most books go out of print from the moment the first printing ships.

Why? I don't remember this book being heavily hyped; even if it was, it isn't the kind of story that will appeal to the kind of reader that readily responds to hype. You won't want to read this book because it's hip or because it promises you a thrill ride; on the contrary, the book begins quietly and never, ever rants, and as for hipness, well, that sort of thing just seems silly in the context of *Sorcerer's Son*.

I get the feeling that Phyllis Eisenstein wasn't trying for any particular effect at all — I think she was just trying to tell a story that she believed in and cared about. But along about page 10, you realize that this time you've actually opened a medievalish fantasy that *isn't* warmed over Tolkien and *isn't* Candlelight Romances in 14th-

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century drag. This tale of a spider-tending, web-weaving sorceress and her son who is determined to discover his father and become like him is mythic in its vision and yet intimate in every scene, in every sentence. The magics of this world are dangerous and personal, with some powers drawn from enslaved demons and others coming from a tender affection for fellow creatures. The magic of this *book* is drawn from a wonderfully rich imagination and a compassionate understanding of the hungers of the soul.

Eisenstein never struts or shows off. She doesn't try to flash some fantasy fireworks in your eyes to make sure you notice that there's something special going on. You don't suspect that there's something magnificent going on until you're deeply inside it — until young Cray's demon father, determined to discourage the boy from seeking him any further, stages evidence of his own death; and even then, it sneaks up on you that this book does, in fact, come down to saving the world. It's just that the world that needs saving isn't *our* world, it's the strange, invisible, and sometimes hilarious world of the demons.

The NAL paperback is still available — but this book is worth the trip to a specialty store or the inquiry to a mail order house to get the British hardcover.

Brainstorm, Steven M. Krauzer (Bantam Spectra, paper, 344pp, $4.99)

I can't figure out how some decisions get made in the world of publishing. I see so many dreary, phony, and stupid novels get published in hardcover with all the bestseller hype in the world, and then I see a novel like *Brainstorm* — which, for all its flaws, is as fast-moving and hard-hitting a slick contemporary adventure as anything I've seen — get released as a paperback original. I mean, I'm sure the folks at Bantam feel that their paperback originals are better than most people's hardcovers, but let's all admit right now that you know and I know that when a publisher with a hardcover line choses to put a book out in paper only, they don't think they've got the next Stephen King between those covers.

As long as I'm mentioning Stephen King's name, why not go ahead and compare this book with *Firestarter*! A psionically gifted child in jeopardy from an evil government agency that wants to do things with that marvelous little brain, nice people who get caught up in the events, one of whom turns out to have psi powers, too; and finally a confrontation with a psychotic "enforcer" that the government *thought* it controlled but who actually has his own agenda. For all

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I know, Krauzer might have been studying *Firestarter* when he started working on outlining this book — his first published novel. If so, he learned most of the right lessons — and brought something of his own to the tale.

What he brought was an off-kilter ironic vision that has his psionic fugitive kid supporting himself across America by "influencing" people to let him into poker games, where — not too surprisingly — he makes a few bucks now and then. And when the kid — David McKay — is taken in for a while by a kind-hearted waitress named Sherrilyn, he discovers that he's reached puberty in the most embarrassing possible way — by intruding his first erotic dream into poor unsuspecting Sherrilyn's mind. Middle-aged women don't always react kindly to living inside the adolescent male mind.

Brainstorm is funny when it's supposed to be funny, and it's tense where it's supposed to be tense, and it's scary where it's supposed to be scary. The only place it doesn't measure up is in the science fiction. Admittedly, psionics in fiction is always black-box pseudo-science anyway (very much as it is in real life), but Krauzer expects us to buy a laughable sort of magic brain surgery that can — through really clever knife work, I suppose — give people such specific brain alterations that they will be loyal to one particular master. Puh-leeeze. Didn't we stop writing *that* sort of thing in 1940?

But there are worse clunkers in most other near-future sci-fi adventures that weren't written by Michael Crichton, and what Krauzer does well he does *so* well that I can promise you a wonderful time. I picked up this book just to sample it, just to see if I should give it away or keep it to read later; it was at a time when I was deeply involved in writing a novel of my own in order to meet an urgent deadline, and I did *not* have time to read someone else's novel. I knew in three pages that I'd review it, and I set it aside for later reading. The next night at three A.M. I found myself reading the last page, knowing that whatever it is that makes somebody a top-flight irresistible commercial fiction writer, Krauzer's got it and so he's going to be one and hey, here's a bargain, you can get his first terrific page-turner at paperback prices.

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Bradley Denton published his first short story in these pages ("The Music of the Spheres," March 1984). He has gone on to sell us many of his stories since, including the Hugo- and Nebula-award nominee, "The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians." His second novel, Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede *just appeared in hardcover from William Morrow & Company. "Rerun Roy, Donna, and the Freak" is yet another departure for Brad. No dead comedians or rock musicians here — just a quirky science fictional drug, and a glimpse into the underworld it fosters. Throw in an homicidal crazy man for good measure, and you have something that is quintessentially Denton.*

RERUN ROY, DONNA, AND THE FREAK

By Bradley Denton

DESPITE WHAT THE PARanoid, cop-controlled media would have you believe, I am not some kid-killing fiend. I do not sell to kids. Besides, what I sell is harmless — unless you choose to use it in a manner against my instructions, in which case you're *trying* to off yourself, to which I say, It's a free planet. Or is supposed to be.

My business is limited to one product that I manufacture myself. That product is expensive, but only because I'm scrupulous about purity. Quality control costs money, so my profits are not the obscene bundles that the morality fascists claim.

I emphasize: I am not a killer. I don't even carry a weapon. I am, in fact, a most humane kind of guy.

Ask any of my regulars. Ask Donna. Donna requires the stuff almost

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daily, on account of her application of it is essential to her self-image, but she was able to scrape up enough cash only for her initial purchase. Ever since, she has paid in barter. Which was what she was doing on a Tuesday night in June when the Freak pounded on the back door of my van.

I didn't know then that he was the Freak. What I knew was that his hammering on my mobile dispensary was ruining the rhythm that Donna and I had established, and therefore pissed me off. I yelled for whoever it was to go away. The noise continued, and my next thought was that such persistence could mean cops. Donna and I disengaged.

We pulled on our clothes, and I squinted through the night-vision peephole in the back door. No battalion of cops or DEA jackboots waited outside, just one scrawny guy dressed like the Average Dude. Colorless skin; limp, mouse-brown hair; glassy eyes. Nobody I knew, therefore Nobody Period, as far as I was concerned. I got on the p.a. and told him that he had a four-second head start before the van tried to run him down. His feet stayed put, but one of his hands held up a wad of cash. I said I would be with him in a minute.

I turned to Donna. "New customer," I said. "Know him?"

Donna came to the peephole. "Skinny white dude. Could be you." She looked at me. "We gonna finish, or what?"

I got back on the p.a. "You got references?"

The Freak's voice crackled. "Earl says you can fix me up."

"Don't know no Earl." It was a lie, but I said it as if it were a pronouncement from God Above. I squinted through the hole to see his reaction.

"He says to tell you it's 'Earl at the kitchen,'" the Freak said. "He swears nobody's rerun cooks like Roy's. You're Roy, right?"

"Ain't what my folks named me," I said. That was true, Roy being my nom de deal. "And if you want a rerun, I suggest you go home and watch the TV."

The Freak nodded. "Earl said you'd be careful." Earl was another of my barter customers, although what he gave me in exchange was not similar to what I got from Donna.

"*Don't know no Earl,*" I repeated, loud.

"Don't know no Donna, either, I bet," Donna muttered.

The Freak scowled. He was getting pissed off, too. "The Earl I'm talking

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about likes the girls at Honey's. Met him there yesterday afternoon. He was stuffing fivers into G-strings. Old dude. Said if you phoned, he'd vouch. Told him my name was Dirk."

I considered. If "Dirk" was heat, then the heat already had poor old horny Earl dangling from a claw. He'd vouch, all right . . . but I knew Earl pretty well, and figured I could hear if he was being doped or choked. Besides which, I hadn't said anything incriminating to the Freak, and wouldn't to Earl. So I told the Freak to hold his water, and made the call.

Earl was at work. I heard the floor polisher whining down as he answered. This gave my mind ease. "Earl," I said at my most convivial, "how hangs it?"

"Roy! My man!" In Earl's speech was no hint of cop-sweat. "You need the kitchen?"

"Nah. Slow night, so I thought I'd check the status of your pantry." This was not out of character for me. I am most considerate of my regulars.

"O.K. for now," Earl said. "I'll need a, um, grocery run in two, two and a half weeks. That do?"

"Absolute. I'll cook supper, then. Meantime, like I said, things are slow. So you run across anybody who needs nutritional advice, you give a yell."

"Sure. Oh hey, did Dick ever get hold of you?"

"Dick who?"

"Jeez, I dunno. Ran into him at Honey's. Got a light complexion, brown hair. The girls liked him, so I figure he's O.K."

Poor old horny Earl. "I'll watch for him," I said. "Stay cool, hear?"

"Bitchin'," he said. I heard the floor polisher start up again as I snapped the phone onto my belt.

Donna had her arms crossed, and was giving me the eye. We had a deal. It wasn't her fault that her end of it hadn't worked out this week. I turned to the counter along the right wall, unlocked the oven, and nudged the thawing pizza aside so I could reach my working stash. I opened two of the four steel boxes and counted out four fifty-mike tabs and three hundred-mike caps. I put them into a Baggie.

Same time next week," I said. I closed the boxes, relocked the oven, and handed her the Baggie.

She stuffed it into her jeans pocket. "Where?"

"Dunno. Call twenty minutes before."

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This was Donna's pet peeve. "Dammit, Roy, I got no wheels. You need a permanent hole."

"Nah. Good way to get nailed."

"Not if you moved to Mexico. The cops aren't so rabid, and people would come over the river for the stuff."

I shook my head. "Sorry. My customers all live in Austin. Besides, I prefer to stay a moving target. Keeps the mind sharp." I checked all four peepholes and saw no one except the Freak, so opened the back door. Donna muttered something and jumped out.

The Freak's eyebrows rose, and he grinned. In the glow of the furniture-store parking lot's sodium lights, his teeth were yellow. He gave Donna the once-over.

"Hey, mama," he said.

"Fuck you," Donna replied, and took off at a jog. She crossed the street in front of a cab, which honked at her, and then shrank away down the sidewalk.

The Freak watched her go. "Not half-ugly," he said. "Little chunky, but hey, not half."

I was still somewhat pissed and in no mood to discuss Donna's physiology. All I cared to discuss with the Freak was his cash. But safety first. I stepped down from the van with metal detector in hand. The Freak looked concerned, maybe thinking it was a cattle prod.

"Raise your hands and don't blink, 'Dirk,'" I said. "Any movement I don't request will get this door shut in your face and a bumper up your ass. Try anything coercive once we're inside, and you won't come out."

The Freak hesitated, then raised his hands. The money rustled. I ran the detector up, down, and around, and, except for one key-ring-sized peep, it stayed quiet. But he could still be carrying a plastic piece, or he might be wired. So I also had to pat him down and get intimate about it. Unlike most new customers, he didn't react to the crotch grope. His breath smelled of beer.

He wasn't carrying anything but the keys, and if he was wired, the bug was too small to find. I took away the keys, dropped them, and told him to get into the van. He did so and settled onto the cushions against the left wall. I followed, locking the door. Then I sat on the stool beside the counter, rested my elbows on the edge of the sink, and waited for him to say something.

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He was grinning again. The bulb in the van's ceiling was white, but his teeth still looked yellow. "You sell rerun?"

"Why? You buy it?"

He spread the money on the cushions. "One thousand in twenties, fifties, and hundreds," he said. "I want as much as it'll buy. And I know the market value."

I figured he was new in town. Had to be, if he used and hadn't checked me out before now. "Sometimes you have to pay more than market value for quality," I said. "You want ice cream without cellulose, don't you?"

The Freak's grin twisted. "I'm not buying ice cream."

"Same rule applies to any product."

The twisted grin became a snarl. "So how much? Dollar a microgram?"

I made a face. "Wood pulp."

"Dollar and a quarter?"

One of my rules of survival is that I never quote a price myself. So I waited, and before long the Freak uttered the magic words, "Two dollars a mike."

"Pure dairy premium," I said.

He wasn't grinning at all now. He looked down at his money. "That gets me only five hundred mikes."

"Eat too much ice cream, you get fat."

He gave me a look. Most unfriendly. Most scary, if I had known he was the Freak.

He gathered up the money and threw it at me. I ducked, and it landed in the sink.

"I don't have a choice," the Freak said, his voice low. "Better be good."

I counted the cash. A thousand even. I locked it away in the drawer under the oven. "What size scoops?" I asked.

He looked confused. "Huh?"

"Scoop sizes, Dirk. Small, medium, large, or gut-buster?"

He didn't look any less confused.

"I thought you knew the market," I said.

His eyes shifted. "Yeah, but I've never. . . ."

"Eaten ice cream before."

"Yeah."

He was a first-timer, and I had taken his cash. I had an ethical respon-

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sibility. I unlocked the oven, took a single tab from the ten-mike box, and then relocked the oven.

"If you're an oinker," I said, "I will now find out."

The Freak didn't seem to hear me. He was staring at the tab on my palm. "Is that five hundred mikes?"

"Nah. Just a taste spoon."

He took the pill and popped it into his mouth. Say this for the Freak, he was brave. But then, I consider bravery one of the more destructive forms of insanity.

"How long before it hits?" he asked.

"A few minutes," I said, dropping the ice cream act. We were both committed now. If he was heat, he was about to be turned up higher than was good for his job. "Then you'll have five or ten to go back wherever you like. Duration depends on your head. You need to give me a trigger now, while you're still straight."

"Trigger?"

"Uh-huh. At home you can use a video, music, or whatever you like. After some practice, you can do it by concentrating. But what I need now is a word, a phrase, a sound. Something that happened at the beginning of the event you'd like to go back to. Something that'll snap you to it once you start getting goofed."

"And then I'll really be back there?"

I made a noise through my nose. "You'll 'really' be right here, and I'll watch you drool. But you won't know it. You'll be too busy seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and smelling whatever you were seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and smelling then."

His lips twitched into a smirk. "Gee, how can I pick?"

He was being sarcastic. I didn't know why, but I didn't care. "Depends on why you wanted to buy in the first place," I said. "Some of my customers want to relive the best sex they ever had. Others are former junkies who want to get high without shooting, sniffing, or smoking. I even have one client who uses my product as a diet aid." That was Donna. "Whenever she craves high-calorie trash, she just takes fifty or a hundred mikes with a light snack and then regobbles nine or ten of the most dangerous desserts she's ever had. She's lost sixty pounds in six months."

"I don't need to lose weight," the Freak said.

He didn't seem to be getting the picture. "Yeah, I can see that. But

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I can't see what you *do* need, Dirk. That's up to you. Think of it fast, and give me a trigger. Otherwise you might go someplace you don't want to revisit. It can happen."

The Freak was quiet for a moment, and then his smirk became that grin again. "Say 'Please,'" he said.

"Just that?"

"Just that. Over and over."

His party, I figured, so I poured myself a soda and waited. The stuff took almost fifteen minutes to hit him, and I could tell he was getting impatient. But then his pupils contracted to black points.

"O.K., this is it," I said.

"Thish ish whaaaat?" he said, and then his jaw just sort of hung there. He slumped against the wall.

"Please," I said. "Please, please, please, please."

His jaw came up, and the grin was back. I was surprised. I'd watched hundreds of rerunners, and he was only the second who'd had a physical response other than catalepsy. The first had been a quirky dude who had chosen to relive his coronary. But instead of clutching his chest and dropping, the Freak chuckled. Low and mean.

Then he spoke. "Please," he said, in that sarcastic tone again. "Please, please, please." Then another chuckle. And the grin, which stayed put for the next eleven minutes.

Then he shuddered, moaned, and was back. He sat up straight and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He stared with lust in his eyes, but not for me. For which I was grateful. I wondered which eleven minutes of his life he had rerun. None of my business, but I figured they must have been wild.

"Good ride?" I asked.

The lust faded, and he looked stupefied. The post-past response, at least, was typical. "It was just like it was," he said.

I nodded. "You had ten mikes and were gone eleven minutes."

He whipped back to here-and-now sharp. "That was the only thing wrong. It wasn't long enough."

"Told you it was just a taste. If what you want to relive lasted longer than eleven minutes, you'll need bigger doses. You stay back at about a minute per mike, which is average — but you can't count on that holding true every time. I recommend timed-release caps for the longer stays." I

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turned toward the oven. "Anyway, you've paid for five hundred. I've got tabs in ten and fifty, caps in one hundred and 250. You figure out what you want."

"Two-fifties would give me only four hours apiece," he said. His voice was petulant. "I need twice that."

I glanced over my shoulder at him and laughed. "Jesus, that must have been some party."

His eyes widened. "Oh, it was."

His tone cut my laugh off cold. I got down to business again. "I don't recommend staying back more than a few hours at a time," I said. "Saw a guy once after he'd taken a 750-mike cap. Not made by me, I should add. He reran for forty hours. Unexpected, but not weird. Woke up dehydrated. Sick for a month. So I suggest short hops, no more than twice a week for a beginner."

The Freak was eyeing the oven. "I want 250s," he said. "If I took two at once, it'd be like taking a five hundred, right?"

His life. "My guess is you'd net a longer run than one cap, but not double. They'd be time-releasing together." I unlocked the oven, took two caps from the 250 box, and put them into a Baggie. I relocked the oven and tossed the Baggie to him. Then I had one last ethical duty. Afterward he could go rerun underwater for all I cared. "I heard about one other mega-dose case. Dude took something like fifteen hundred mikes. He didn't come back."

"You mean he died?"

I made the noise through my nose again. "I mean he didn't come *back*. And since this stuff works in real time, he didn't just keep on rerunning whatever party he'd gone to. He started out there, but then he relived everything afterward, too."

The Freak tucked the Baggie into a jacket pocket. "So what happened when he reran up to the point where he took the fifteen hundred?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he'd've snapped out of it. Or maybe not. If not, there'd be no way to tell whether he went back to the party again or just zoned out. But the question is moot, because after three years his family had him euthanatized."

The Freak gave the chuckle he'd given under the influence. My spine shimmied. "Fortunately for me," he said, "everybody in my family's already dead themselves."

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Nice guy. I checked the peephole and saw that I had another customer waiting outside, a regular who knew better than to bother me while the door was closed. I opened it and motioned for the Freak to get out.

He started to do so, then gave me a look. "How do I find you again?"

"Beats me," I said. His money was good, so if he did find me again, fine. If not, though, even better. My feelings toward him had become stronger than dislike. Just not my kind of dude, I figured.

"Ah well," the Freak said, jumping down to the asphalt. "I caught up with you once. I can do it again." He picked up his keys and walked to a scabrous Taurus at the edge of the lot.

The regular climbed into the van, and I closed the door. When I opened it again, the Taurus was gone. I resolved not to set up shop in this neighborhood again for a while. Short-term bucks are nice, but mutual trust between producer and consumer is more profitable in the long run. I learned that in business school, not long before I dropped out to teach myself some practical chemistry.

TWO NIGHTS later I had set up in a Dairy Queen parking lot south of the river. DQs are good; they close at ten, but nobody pays any mind if cars are in the lot at 1:30. Along about three, I'd already had a good night, with several regulars and a couple of frat rats having dropped by for some tens and fifties. I was about to pack up and head home to eat my pizza, when a rattletrap pickup pulled into the lot. It was Earl's. He had driven it the first time he'd found me, and I'd seen it often enough since then, parked at the high school where he was the night watchman and janitor.

That was what tipped me. My other customers had to come to me to get their prescriptions filled, but I delivered to Earl at his place of employment on account of our special arrangement. Whereas Donna and several other regulars paid me in goods or services in lieu of cash, Earl paid me in access to the high school's chemistry lab. Every two or three weeks, depending on business, I would show up at a side door with gym bag in hand. Our agreement was that I would then give Earl whatever dosages he needed, and he would look the other way while I went to the lab and cooked. I provided my own raw materials and left the lab as I found it. This arrangement had been in place for over a year.

In other words, there was no reason for Earl to find me at the van

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unless something was wrong. And he hadn't phoned first.

Earl parked five spaces away and walked toward me. Earl's walk was never what you would call smooth, but tonight his stride possessed a lot of tremble.

I had the van's back door open, taking the air. "Earl!" I called, keeping my voice jovial. "What shakes?"

Earl's tired-old-man eyes brimmed with misery. He gave a smile that did not convince. "Not a thing, Roy," he said. "Stiff as a crowbar. Just thought I'd stock up."

I slammed the door and locked it. Poor old horny Earl. Damn the jackbooted motherfuckers. Grieving, I turned on the oven. It heated to five hundred degrees in twenty seconds, crisping the tabs and caps in their steel boxes and ruining the pizza. Someone started pounding on the door. I gave the oven another fifteen seconds, then shut it off and put on kitchen mitts. I opened the oven, the heat slamming me in the face, and threw the boxes into the sink. They came open, and I turned on the tap. In the oven the pizza was smoking. The stench of burnt cheese was intense. The blackened tabs and caps dissolved as the water hit them. I let the sink fill.

The pounding was now accompanied by piggish squeals. "Open up! Open up, or we'll blow you apart!"

The cop doing the screaming didn't sound desperate yet, so I popped a New House Bandidos chip into the player and piped the sound out through the p.a. Then I opened the sink drain. I hoped the music would cover the sound of water whizzing out under the van.

I let the tap run until the tank was almost empty, about another thirty seconds. Then I tipped the oven so that the charred pizza slid into the sink. It flaked and crumbled and stank. Black chunks swirled. Then, as the tank went dry, a drill bit skreeled through the back door. I figured it was time to surrender. I unlocked the door.

"It's open," I said through the p.a., blending my voice with the music. I put my hands on my head.

They yanked open the door, jabbed rifles at my nose, and then dragged me out and threw me facedown on the pavement. One of them put a boot into my spine while a couple of others each took an arm and twisted it back. I was handcuffed, then kicked in the ribs and ordered to stand up. Standing up is a good trick when you're lying facedown with your hands cuffed behind your ass. I had to roll over to do it. One of the cops took that

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as an aggressive move, and I got a rifle butt upside the head. I made it to my feet then, but I wasn't too steady on them.

A plainclothes cop in a tweed jacket read me my rights while three or four uniforms clambered into the van. The Bandidos were cut off in mid-obscenity, and I heard my cash drawer being pried open. But I didn't mind much, because none of the cops were crawling under the van with sample bottles or absorbent pads. I could see the edge of the puddle creeping out behind the left front tire.

Poor old horny Earl was being handcuffed a few yards away. He was crying. "I'm sorry, Roy," he said. "They made me. I had to."

I wanted to at least nod to him, to let him know that I understood, but I couldn't. Gestures and noises, including flipping-the-bird and farting, have been interpreted by more than one court as speech, meaning that you have waived your right to silence. If I wanted to keep that weapon, I couldn't do anything that the oinkers didn't order me to do. And that made me feel like shit. If anyone deserved a comforting word or look, it was Earl. He had never done anything wrong. How can it be wrong, I want to know, for an old man to spend a few hours a week revisiting his lovers?

I felt moisture on my cheek. For a second I was afraid that I was crying, too. Then I saw speckles on the tweed cop's collar, heard a fat drop burst on the van roof.

It was raining. Pretty soon it was coming down hard, washing everything on the pavement into the storm drains. I wanted to laugh, but I knew my rights.

They put me and Earl into the same cell, and he felt the need to explain. He had been at Honey's that afternoon. He had been drinking. Some dude his own age had started talking to him. The conversation had gotten around to lost loves, and before he knew it, Earl had given the dude a fifty-mike tab gratis. This went against my most fervent warnings, but he was drunk, and he forgot.

The dude produced a badge and told Earl that he could either lead the cops to me or face charges not only of possession but of dealing, which is a possible death rap in this fair state. I doubt that they could have made it stick, since Earl sold nothing, but he was too scared to think that through.

So he'd handed me over. In the cell he begged me to forgive him, and I couldn't even blink in his direction. It may be possible to find a Texas jail

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cell that isn't bugged, but I wasn't going to bet it was mine.

After a few hours of getting the silent treatment, Earl rolled over on his bunk and fell asleep. I dozed some myself, then woke up when the tweed cop and a couple of uniforms came to haul me to Interrogation. The tweed cop looked pissed, no doubt because they hadn't gotten a taped confession. I hoped that he was also pissed because the cop lab and been unable to stick me with anything other than possession of burnt pizza.

I shuffled down the hall between the uniforms, beltless, shoeless, phoneless, and manacled. When they shoved me into the folding chair in the Interrogation room, I said, "Lawyer."

The tweed cop leaned over the table, blowing his rank breath in my face. "With or without a lawyer, Mr. 'Rerun Roy,' there's only one game you can play to avoid the lethal-injection table. The name of that game is cooperation. See, we already know that you cook your own stuff and that you know the Austin drug underground like you know your own dick. So what you have to do now is recite the name of every dealer and user in town. If you don't, you'll be taking a long nap."

I had only one thing to say: "Lawyer." If I could get to a phone, I could call the one I had in mind and punch in number 17 when her secretary answered. She'd be at the station house in three minutes.

The tweed cop shook his head. "You're here on a drug charge, boy. I can keep you for weeks without giving you a lawyer, or bail, or even food and water. No judge in the state will so much as cluck a tongue. Especially since we got all the evidence we need to put you down." His voice rose, and he glared so hard I could see his eyeballs sweat.

That's when I figured that if I could hold on for a while, I'd be O.K. Because he wasn't saying anything about lab results. If the cop chemists had managed to boil down any incriminating quantity, he'd be holding it over me like a sledgehammer.

I met the tweed cop's glare with a dull gaze. "Lawyer," I said.

Pretty soon he gave up and had me taken back to my cell. Earl was still there. He was awake again, but he didn't say anything. I slept a few more hours, and then a uniform gave me a phone to make my call.

When I punched 17, my lawyer's secretary informed me that my lawyer was in jail herself. She'd been caught smoking crack, a vice of her youth that she'd returned to because she could afford it.

Idiot. If she'd wanted to feel that cheap high again, why hadn't she

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done it the modern way? Why hadn't she come to me?

The fascists kept me locked up with Earl for two weeks without a second phone call. They didn't interrogate me again, but Earl kept trying for a kind word. Of course, I had to keep on ignoring him. I wouldn't even play cards when a jailer tossed in a deck. So Earl played solitaire on his bunk, giving me wistful looks.

It's not easy to spend two weeks silent, without drugs or TV. I figured that word of my incarceration would hit the street, and a lawyer would appear to get me sprung — but it was taking a long time. I was about to start chewing on the bars, when a jailer and two uniforms came by and said I was being bailed out.

This sounded weird, on account of I hadn't had a bail hearing. But I was not inclined to bring this up. As I left, Earl said good-bye, sounding miserable. What they had done to him not even the most depraved junkie ever deserved. And what I'd had to do to him was about as bad. He no doubt still thinks I hate his guts.

The uniforms took me upstairs, where the desk sergeant gave me my belt, phone, and shoes and told me that if I left town, I would be hunted down and shot like a dog. The van was impounded until after my prelim. My prelim date hadn't been set, but I would be informed by mail. And if I didn't show up, I would be hunted down and shot like a dog. This seemed to be the desk sergeant's favorite phrase. I figured him for a cat person.

I went out to the sunshine, and damn near went blind. Sunshine and I don't get along during normal times, much less when I've been in a basement for two weeks. I stumbled down the steps, and someone took my arm and steered me onto the sidewalk. I didn't recognize her at first, what with the bronze-lens shades and dry-clean suit. Then she spoke.

"Walk fast before they change their heads," she said. It was Donna. "I borrowed a car. Parked a few blocks up."

The car was an old Miata. The sad little piece of junk confirmed my assumptions about Donna's financial status: she couldn't even *borrow* anything of value. And her suit was worn-down dull and smelled of maybe two hundred cleanings.

"Thanks for bailing me," I said, squeezing into the passenger seat. "Take me home, and I'll pay you back cash, plus a 10-percent thank-you." This would be the first time that any of my customers had seen where I slept.

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She started the engine. It coughed, and the car shook. "Didn't pay cash," Donna said, pulling into traffic. "Got a judge to kick you for . . . barter. Good for a week. Best I could do."

I didn't have anything to say to that.

Donna followed my directions to my one-room in Hyde Park. I invited her in, and she was most willing to accept. When we got inside, we found the place a shambles. The cops had gone to town. I took off my phone and shoes, then kicked the pile of clothes, chips, and software off my air mattress. I lay down and suggested that Donna join me. She no longer seemed so willing.

"They cleaned you," she said, looking around at the mess.

"Nah. This is all I've ever had here. And my housekeeping's not much anyhow."

"But I mean," she began, and stopped. She chewed her lip. I saw then what the problem was. She'd gained a couple of pounds. She'd wanted to come inside so I'd give her some stuff. But I didn't keep rerun at home. I had three storage cubicles around town, rented under aliases, where I stashed inventory.

"Say no more," I said.

She looked relieved. "You can help me out?"

"No. Say no more, because the place'll be bugged."

Now she looked as if she were about to cry. Donna has a most changeable face. "Roy, I'm down to my last sack of groceries. Can't do nothing for me?"

"Sorry. I'm currently unemployed."

Donna turned toward the door. "Bye, then," she said. "Got to go to work. Return the car." She went out and closed the door behind her. Hard.

What the hey. I got up and grabbed a soda from the fridge and some people chow from the cupboard. Was surprised that the cops hadn't helped themselves. Then I flopped back onto the mattress. I had to figure how to relaunch my business. I also had to find a more reliable lawyer than the crackhead. For the time being, though, I had to have a full afternoon's sleep. A few weeks in jail can wear a man out, all the more so when the guy who set him up is on the bunk across the cell.

I wished that Donna had stayed, but I wasn't surprised that she hadn't. The consumer never appreciates the difficulties of the producer.

* * *

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It was the Freak. My skin started stinging like I was covered with fire ants.

I was awakened by warm, moist air on my face. Smelling of beer. Tickling my nose. I opened my eyes and was confused. The room was dark. I had slept a long time. There was a black shape above me. Somebody was on the bed, leaning over me, breathing on me.

"Donna?" I mumbled.

"Donna," a voice echoed. "That the chick brought you here? I recognized her. She was with you that night. The night I gave you a thousand for five hundred."

It was the Freak. My skin started singing like I was covered with fire ants.

"Get off my bed," I said.

He stood. A moment later the overhead light came on, jabbing my eyes. The Freak stood beside the door.

If he had been less than attractive that first night, he was now downright hideous. His hair hung over on one side of his face, as if he had a dirty mop on his head. His skin was sallow, speckled with dull stubble. His eyes were a gelatinous blue. Like twin jellyfish.

"I followed her," he said.

I sat up. I was still groggy. "Who?"

"Your chick. Miss Donna. Followed her here when she got you out of jail. Followed her back to work. Followed her home, too. Another chick dropped her off. I thought about going in for a visit, but decided to come over here first."

My stomach was knotting up. "Why's that?"

He stepped closer and stared down at me. "Let's take a walk." He cupped a hand around his ear and pointed at the wall. Like me, he figured the place was bugged.

I didn't want to "take a walk," but I did want to know why he tailed one of my customers. I got up and shuffled into the john to pee, then put on shoes and went outside with him. He picked the direction and wouldn't say anything more until we reached his Taurus, three blocks away. Then he opened the door and told me to get inside. I told him we could talk just fine outside, and he said that in that case, he might go "visit" Donna after all. I got inside.

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He slid into the driver's seat and looked at me as if I were a roadkill and he were a buzzard. "I need rerun," he said. He was sweating, and his beer smell was getting sour.

I held my hands palm-up. "Oinkers everywhere. You're gonna have to live in the present for a while."

His jellied eyes shimmered with the lights of a passing car. "You don't understand, Roy. If you don't give me some, bad things will happen."

"And if I give you some," I said, "I'll be looking at lethal injection. Sorry, Dirk. There ain't enough money. Try again in six months. When the heat's off."

He looked away, staring out at the shadowed trees of Hyde Park. "Heat," he said. "Heat makes me think of New Orleans."

"Glad to hear it. Gotta go." I pulled on the door handle, but the door wouldn't open. Then I tried the window, and it wouldn't open. Then I tried the window, and it wouldn't come down.

"I was in New Orleans before I came to Austin," the Freak continued. "I left because of a girl named Marie. Pretty little girl. She wasn't the first, but she was the best. They almost got me because of her."

And I thought, Oh shit.

I don't live in a vacuum. I watch the news. New Orleans. A girl named Marie. A girl-cutter the media called the Freak. Serial killers come and go like raphouse bands, but the media paid special attention to the Freak. Because of the most unusual things he was into. They'd shown pictures on CNN. The ones they could get away with.

"She lasted almost ten hours," the Freak said. "Just the absolute best. That's why I wanted the biggest dose I could get. So I could do it again. From beginning to end. And then again." He looked at me. "It worked, Roy. Two 250s at once, and everything was the same. I saw her. Heard her. Tasted her. Felt her. *Smelled* her. All just the same. Just like you promised."

I tried the door handle again, and he put a hand on my arm. Then I saw the utility knife in his other hand. A triangle of razor blade slid up.

"I'm not trying to leave," I said. "Just gotta puke."

He touched a button on his armrest, and my window opened halfway. I got my head outside and puked. Soda pop and people chow. The Freak kept talking as if the noise and stink were normal. No doubt they were, for him.

"But I had enough money for only one rerun of that perfect experience," he said. "So I went looking for you again, thinking we could make a deal.

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Then I heard at Honey's that you and Earl were in jail. That made me sad." He paused as I pulled my head back inside, then gave me his grin. The grin I had hated from the first. "See, now that I've known perfection, I can't give it up."

The window closed. I wiped my face on my sleeve. I was sweating now, too. "O.K.," I said, eyeing the door-lock buttons on his armrest. "Let's go. I'll take you to my stash." I would try to get him into heavy traffic, say the Drag or Sixth Street, then reach across and hit the buttons while he was busy driving. Too busy, I would hope, to cut me. At which point I would bail out and run to the cops.

The irony of this plan did not escape me. But the cops were the only guys I knew who were nasty enough to handle a dude like the Freak. Send a brutal bastard to catch a brutal bastard.

"I have a gun," the Freak said. He opened his jacket, and I saw a pistol grip protruding from an inner pocket. I thought of grabbing for it, but the knife was in the way. "If you try to leave the car, I'll use it. Then I'll drive over to Miss Donna's to use the razor. I don't think it's possible to re-create my experience with Marie, but I'm willing to try. If I don't get my rerun, I mean."

For the first time in my professional life, I wished that I carried a gun myself. Damn my ethics.

"I'll see that you get it," I said.

"I'm sure you will," the Freak replied. "Tell you how I know. You and I are going over to Miss Donna's right now, and I'm going to stay with her while you go out on foot and bring back ten thousand mikes."

"I may not have that much." In fact, I knew that I had only seventy-five hundred.

The Freak raised his eyebrows. "Better hope. Because if you don't return to Miss Donna's with ten thousand in one hour or less, I'll start on her. And if you don't return at all, I'll phone the police and say that you were seen running from there. When they come to investigate, they'll find her. And whom will they suspect?"

The only way I could see to get myself out of the Freak's scheme was to resort to violence, which would favor him and his weapons. My one bizarre hope, then, was that the cops had my apartment not only bugged, but stalked out as well. Then they would follow me and the Freak to Donna's, and maybe realize that something was wrong.

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Or maybe they'd sit outside while the Freak shot and carved us. Or follow me to my stash while the Freak carved Donna. In either case, I would be as good as dead, and my only option would be to choose my executioner — the Freak, or the state of Texas.

Some choice.

The Freak made me drive. I thought that might give me a chance to run for it, but he brought out the pistol and kept it cocked. I had no doubt that he would pull the trigger if I made a bad move.

He told me which streets to take and how fast to drive. I didn't care where we were going, thinking more about whether the bullet would hit me in the ribs, neck, or head. But I couldn't miss the fact that we were heading into East Austin. Lots of broken glass and fire-scorched brick. I had never set up shop in this area for fear of scaring off the money.

The Freak had me stop in an alley beside a stucco duplex with cardboard over the windows. I had to stay put while he got out of the car and came around to my side. I smelled rotting garbage. He took the keys from the ignition and ordered me out. I had to walk in front of him to one of the duplex's two back doors. Yellow light squeezed out around its edges. I pounded on the splintered wood.

"Guh way," Donna's voice called from inside. The words were slurred, as if she'd been sleeping.

The Freak prodded me with the gun. "Tell her it's you. Tell her you have rerun."

"It's Roy," I said to the door. "Got some stuff."

"Louder," the Freak ordered.

I glanced back at him. "Won't it wake the neighbors?"

He grinned. "Other half of the duplex is empty. And the rest of the neighborhood hears worse than this every night of the week."

It was no doubt true. "It's me!" I shouted. "Got what you want!" I had a wild thought that maybe Donna would hear that my voice wasn't right, that maybe she had a gun, and that maybe she would sneak out the front and come around to shoot the Freak before she knew what was happening.

Instead, she opened the door. The Freak shoved me into her, and we stumbled into a grimy kitchen, colliding with a table. The Freak came in before we regained our balance. He closed the door and held the pistol on us.

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He grinned at Donna. "Want some company, mama?"

A pearl of saliva glistened at one corner of Donna's mouth. She was wearing loose pajamas that hung askew. She looked down at a bowl of mushy raisin bran on the table.

"I knew you would," the Freak said. "Lie down on the floor, Miss Donna." His eyes shifted toward me. "You're on the clock, Roy."

Donna, her hands braced against the table, got down to her knees. I headed for the door.

"Roy," Donna said. "You comin' back?"

Damn. The smart thing to do was hit the road and let Donna fend for herself. Despite what the Freak would tell the cops.

But she was a regular.

I looked back at her. "Soon as I can," I said.

The Freak shoved her the rest of the way down. A reflex started me toward him, and he waved the gun to stop me. Then he sat on Donna. His free hand brought out the utility knife and extended the blade. He grinned.

"Close the door on your way out," he said.

I closed the door on my way out.

I RAN PAST the Taurus toward the street. My biggest stash, four thousand mikes, was three miles north. The other two stashes were farther. Maybe I could steal a car and make all three. Maybe not.

A brown Chevy Orion pulled across the mouth of the alley and stopped. I ran into it and bounced back, falling on my ass. The tweed cop and a uniform emerged. They had no doubt followed me and the Freak from my apartment. The tweed cop was holding a pistol just like the Freak's.

"You're under arrest again," he said. "Leaving custody without posting bail. Plus the previous charges." He jerked his head toward the Taurus. "Assume."

I got to my feet and put my palms on the car trunk. The uniform fondled me while the tweed cop started reciting my rights.

I interrupted him. "There's a murderer holding a woman hostage in this duplex," I said. "He's a girl-cutter."

"Shut up," the tweed cop said. He started reciting my rights again.

"It's the guy I came here with," I said. "He's the Freak. The dude who sliced those women in New Orleans."

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"I said shut up," the tweed cop snarled. The uniform banged my head against the fender.

"I just sold this guy and this chick some drugs," I said, "and they're in there using them right now."

The tweed cop stopped reciting. "Call for backup," he told the uniform.

The uniform unclipped a phone from his belt and made the call. Then the tweed cop waved his gun, meaning that I should walk back to Donna's kitchen door. The uniform drew his gun, too.

"Shouldn't you wait for your backup?" I asked, putting my hands on top of my head.

The tweed cop's upper lip twisted. "And give your addicts a chance to flush the stuff? Not this time."

"The guy is armed," I said, turning to lead the way. "The woman isn't, but the guy is." I was hoping they would shoot him right off the bat.

We reached the door. The tweed cop made me knock and announce myself.

"It's me," I said. "I forgot something."

The Freak's voice answered. "Come on in."

"I think he might have heard you," I whispered to the tweed cop.

The oinkers moved to either side of the door. "Go on in," the tweed cop said, keeping his gun on me.

I went on in. The Freak and Donna were sitting at the table. The Freak was eating the raisin bran. He held the spoon in his right hand, slurping, as he watched me enter. I couldn't see his left hand. Donna seemed to be in shock.

"What'd you forget?" the Freak asked around the spoon.

The tweed cop and the uniform came in behind me. "Everyone on the floor!" the tweed cop yelled.

I was on my hands and knees when I saw the flash under the table. There was a bang. The tweed cop collapsed on top of me, smashing my face into the linoleum. There were two more bangs. The tweed cop was squirming, so I rolled over to get him off me. He fell on his side. I got to my hands and knees again.

The Freak was standing. His pistol was in his left hand. The uniform was lying on his back with a hole in his throat, groping for the phone on his belt. The Freak went to him, leaned down, and unclipped the phone. He put it on the table, then leaped down again to pick up the uniform's pistol from the floor.

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"Missed me," the Freak said, and stuck out his tongue. He smashed the phone with a gun butt.

The tweed cop was holding his left thigh with both hands. Blood bubbled from a hole in his pants near the groin. His gun was on the floor a few feet away. I had never fired one, but I was now willing to try.

I was about to reach for it, when the Freak put the uniform's pistol against my ear. "Change in plans. You, Miss Donna, and I will retrieve the ten thousand mikes together. You will drive my car. Miss Donna and I will be in the backseat. If anything I don't like happens, I'll shoot you in the head and hack off Miss Donna's at the shoulders."

I felt like puking again, but I didn't have anything left. "We can't take you car," I managed to say. "These two followed it here, and they've called for help. Every cop in town'll be looking for that Taurus."

"So you're saying I should kill you now?" the Freak asked.

I had to stay cool. I hadn't survived in my job by shitting my pants every time things got kinked. "Nah. I'm saying we should take the cops' car. It's an unmarked Orion. Streets're full of them. And nobody'll be looking for it until after they find these guys."

I couldn't look at the cops as I spoke. Even cops don't deserve to bleed to death on someone else's floor. In my opinion.

It was a ten-minute drive into northeast Austin. The Freak had Donna pressed against the right rear door, with his pistol jammed under her ear. The utility knife was in his other hand. His thumb kept moving up and down, the blade sliding in and out.

I had no doubt that as soon as I gave the Freak any stash at all, he would off me and go to work on Donna. Then he would move on to another city, find another supplier. He would use whatever rerun he took from me to hold him until he got there. Donna and I would have died so that he could relive.

And if I didn't give him the stuff, he would wipe us anyway.

Donna was blitzed. I was pretty sure now that she hadn't been sleeping when the Freak and I had arrived. Nor was she in shock. I couldn't get a good look at her eyes, but I figured she was rerunning. Which meant she'd be no help. In fact, it was clear that Donna, regular or not, would have to be sacrificed. If the chance presented itself, I was out of there.

I stopped the Chevy near the gate of the self-storage complex that

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contained my four thousand mikes. It was the best facility in the county, fully automated and well lit, featuring twelve-foot razor-wire-topped fences and holographic thumbprint locks. It was on the outskirts of the city on a ranch road, with only a few other businesses and homes nearby. The businesses were shut down for the night, and the homes were dark.

"I'll go in and get it," I said, reaching for my door handle. "Be right back."

The Freak's chuckle was deep and heavy. I looked into the rearview and saw him put the knife into a jacket pocket. He reached across Donna and opened the door. "We'll come along."

I got out of the car and walked across the gravel to the gate. The Freak and Donna followed. I glanced back and saw that he still held the gun against her head. His other hand was wound in her hair. She was drooling and mumbling, walking like a zombie. I considered making my break right then, but figured that he could turn the pistol in my direction in an instant.

I stopped at the gate and placed my right thumb against the scan plate. There was a flash of red, and then the keypad glowed green. I punched in my code, and the gate slid open with a rattle. I went on through, and the Freak and Donna came after. The gate closed as I started down the center aisle between the storage buildings.

"If you try to lose me in here," the Freak said behind me, "I'll kill Miss Donna and wait at the gate. If you try to climb out, I'll hear you. While you're trying to get through the wire, I'll blow you a new asshole."

So much for that idea. It looked like violence was indeed going to be my only option. I figured that the best time to do that would be when his attention was focused on the tabs and caps. He wanted them bad enough that I could throw them in his face and have my teeth in his gun hand before he knew what hit him. In theory.

In practical fact, though, I had never been in a fight in my life. That I had won.

I turned down the aisle that ran alongside Building 10, and proceeded to Compartment 30. I put my thumb against its scan plate, and the keypad glowed.

I looked at the Freak. "I have all you want in here," I said, "but the stuff's hidden. It'll take a minute."

The Freak was sweating again. Beads shone on his forehead. He gripped Donna's hair, and they swayed together. He blinked a few times, then

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waved the gun at me and grinned. His teeth were as yellow as cheese.

"We'll come along," he said again.

'It'll be cramped."

"We don't mind. Do we, Miss Donna?" He shook her, and she groaned. Her chin was wet.

I punched in my code. The door unlocked with a click, and I turned the knob. A dim bulb came on inside as the door opened, and I went in.

The cubicle was jammed with merchandise I had accumulated in barter deals. Bicycles, CD and chip players, fishing rods, coin collections, software libraries, and an old Playboy pinball game. I reached underneath the pinball game and groped for the steel box taped there.

The Freak placed the pistol against the base of my skull. "'Fyou pull a gun outta there," he said, "your brains'll be all over the Playmates."

His voice sounded different. The words were a little slurred. But maybe that was how he sounded when he was turned on. When he was about to kill.

I pulled the box free and brought it out. The Freak took the pistol away from my head and focused on the box like a snake on a mouse.

"Open it," he said. With passion.

I lifted the lid. The tabs and caps were lying loose inside.

The Freak's mouth opened. He let go of Donna's hair.

I shoved the box into his face and grabbed for his gun arm. It was gone. He clubbed me on the neck, and I fell against the pinball game. It came down on top of me, and the glass broke. A silver bell bounced across the concrete floor. A shard of glass stuck up from my hand.

The Freak's chuckle reverberated. I was on my back, looking up at him. He shoved Donna against the wall.

As he squatted to scoop up his fallen treasures, he pointed his gun at my face. "Funny, huh, Roy?" he said. Grinning. He replaced the tabs and caps in the box. "This sweet, plump girl bailed you out, and for what? So I could have this, and her. Wish you could see us together. But I can't keep an eye on you and play with her, too."

"Aw, c'mon," I said. I was thinking of jumping him again. But the pinball game was on my leg.

The Freak gave his chuckle again. I was sick of it. Especially now that it was so low and thick. Almost a growl. "Bet you wish she'd left you in jail with Earl," he said, cocking the pistol.

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I stared at him. I wasn't going to close my eyes. I was pissed off.

"Told you before," I said. "Don't know no Earl."

The Freak swayed, almost falling from his squat. He caught himself and blinked. The gun barrel never left its mark. He laughed out loud. His chuckle had been low, but his laugh was a scream.

Donna stepped away from the wall and stood over him. "Don't know no Earl," she said.

The Freak stopped laughing. The gun barrel quivered.

"Don't know no Earl," Donna repeated, her voice droning. "Don't know no Earl."

The Freak's fingers went limp, and the pistol fell. His pupils were the size of pinheads.

My voice joined Donna's. "Don't know no Earl. *Don't know no Earl.*"

The Freak fell over in a fetal position. Saliva dripped from his slack mouth. "Dunnah nuh Uhhhhl," he said, and then he was into it, rerunning, gone.

Donna picked up the gun and rolled the Freak onto his back. He gurgled. I squeezed out from under the pinball game and stood.

"In the raisin bran?" I asked, picking the glass from my hand.

Donna nodded. "Hundred-mike cap. My last one. I was just about to go away, when you two showed up."

"Glad you came back when you did."

She gave a weak smile. "I ate only one bite. Came back on the ride over. Thought I should make like I was still gone until I saw a chance to send him. He had maybe three bites, but I didn't know when it'd hit. I was about to give up and claw his eyes out, when you spoke a trigger."

The Freak's lips were moving. I didn't like it. "Three bites could've been fifty mikes, or five. He might not be gone long." I looked at the gun in Donna's hand.

She tried to hand it to me. "I never killed nobody, Roy."

I wouldn't take it. "Me neither. Seeing him shoot those cops was enough to last me the rest of my life."

Donna's eyes widened. "He shot cops?"

"You were in the past at the time."

Donna dropped the gun. It went off, and the pinball game rang. We both jumped.

The Freak started twitching. "So what do we do with him?" I asked.

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Donna pointed at the steel box. "Give him some more."

I sat and fed the Freak, but I was looking at Donna. "You really would've clawed his eyes out? To keep him from shooting me?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

It felt good. "Didn't know you cared," I said.

She looked surprised. "'Course I do, Roy." She reached down and touched my cheek. "You're my *connection*."

We had to leave Austin. Had to leave the country, in fact. I could've handled the dealing charge, but two bloody cops pushed the trouble index beyond the redline. I hope they lived. They had backup coming, so they should've been found in time. But bloody cops are bloody cops, and their brethren do not forget.

Sure hope they didn't take it out on poor old horny Earl. I like to think that a public defender got him off, and that he's back at Honey's every afternoon, stuffing fivers.

But I doubt it.

We took the tweed cop's Chevy over back roads to San Antonio, having to hide from patrols only twice. In San Antonio, we traded for a minibus, then proceeded to the Rio Grande. There I used my remaining two thousand mikes to buy our way into Mexico. Software from my storage cubicle made a down payment on cooking supplies and a base of operations.

Thus, by force of circumstances, I've taken Donna's suggestion and established a permanent hole in Monterrey. Our reputations have already begun to shine. Business is so good, in fact, that I'm forced to cook every week. Profits are substantial, but, again, not obscene. I shall never forsake my dedication to quality control.

Those customers who choose to dine in have their pick of eleven rooms, each furnished with a bed and toilet. There's a twelfth room as well, but it's occupied.

See, Donna and I decided on Monterrey while in the storage cubicle, in his presence. He was rerunning, but, in rare cases, rerunners can hear things said in the present world. If we had left him for the cops, the stuff might have worn off. In which case the fascists might have gotten something. It was a slim chance, but one that Donna and I were unwilling to take.

So we brought him along, keeping him in the past while we forced

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liquids into him and changed his pants. It was a most unpleasant trip.

Things aren't so bad now that we're settled. Donna and I have it down to a routine. Every morning I change his gastro bag and perform the necessary sanitation chores. It takes about twenty minutes. In the evening, Donna repeats the process. We've discussed putting him into a home, but the cost would be high, and the danger about equal to that of letting the cops have him. I think he's pretty much gone forever, but there's no way to know for sure. Safety first.

He talks sometimes. He repeats both his words and mine, words I remember from our first meeting. I said, "Don't know no Earl," twice in that conversation, each time with considerable force. And since that phrase is his current trigger. . . .

Call it a thirty-second loop. It's not where he would choose to stay, but I figure that girl in New Orleans has suffered enough.

We don't have to leave him there, of course. We could cut off his nutrition and let him take a week or two to die. But in my opinion, this option is no better than using the gun would have been. Donna is less opposed to the idea than I am, but she knows I can't do it. She accepts that. She's my oldest customer, and now my business partner, and she knows me well.

I emphasize: I am not a killer. I don't even carry a weapon.

I am, in fact, a most humane kind of guy.

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After something so serious, a bit of levity. In the years that I've been following her work, Jane Yolen hasn't missed an awards ballot. Sometimes the nominees are her young adult novels, sometimes they are her wonderful short stories. She edits her own line of YA novels for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and has served as past president of the Science Fiction Writers of America. None of which is sufficient preamble for the bizarre little story to follow . . .

Dear Ms. Lonelylegs

By Jane Yolen

DEAR MS. Lonelylegs:

I never thought I would be writing to you. I guess you get a lot of letters that begin that way, hunh? But in my case, it's really true. I have read your column all my life, it seems. It runs in the *Galacticon* which is verifaxed to our colony from starbase every afternoon. And I thought most of the letters sent to you were so weird, they must have been written by staff writers as jokes. But your answers never seem to be jokes. You seem to, I don't know, get to the heart of things. So just in case you really *do* read your mail, I'm writing to you. I really don't have anywhere else to turn.

My problem is my Mom. Well, she's not exactly my Mom. She's my sister, too. What I mean is, I'm her clone. We all are. My four sisters and me were cloned for work on the colony and grown in a staphless environment for nine months and then raised together. Well, maybe raised isn't exactly the right

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word as we are already adult size. It has to do with tissue cultures and stuff you don't need to understand. Not that I think you couldn't. It's just that it's basically boring, you know.

The problem is, my Mom is more like a sister than a Mom. I mean, we're sort of all the same age and size and weight. And we think alike and like the same things, which isn't odd of course since we *are* all the same. Only my Mom thinks that because she is my Mom (or Prime as she likes to be called. I'm Prime Sub 3) she should be able to boss the rest of us around. And I/we don't like it. I mean, after all, she *is* us. So no one of us should be more equal than the others.

Anyway, that's my question: should she?

(signed) Confused Sib

Dear Sib:

You are going through an understandable identity crisis. The tone of your letter is adolescent and, even though your body may be all grown up, your emotions are still growing. Perhaps that is why Prime feels she has the right to boss you around. But one day you will have a whole bunch of Sub Primes of your own to boss around. At least, that's what they tell me it's like on the Clone colonies. So, keep yourself primed, and your time will come.

(signed) Ms. Lonelylegs

Dear Ms. Lonelylegs:

I'm from Betelgeuse and you know what that means. We feel things with our limbs, not like Earthlings with their hearts, or Martians with their mouths, or Terranovans with . . . well, we all know about Terranovans! I used to think that having eight limbs and feeling with them was lots better than having just one heart or three mouths or even a bundle of Terranovan. . . . you knows. But now I'm not so sure.

My problem is this: since turning 970, some three spirts ago, I have had little feeling in seven of my limbs. But my mate — well with him it's grunge, grunge, grunge, all night. I mean, he's a regular grungiac. How can I let him know I'm not interested in that sort of thing any more?

(signed) Limp Limbed

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Dear L/l:

There are a lot of Geusers who'd love to take your over-grunged mate off your legs, so don't complain. Things could be worse. You could live on Alpha0 and have only one leg. At least you've got memories. Different legs for different yeggs, I always say. (That's a yolk, friend!)

(signed) Ms. Lonelylegs

Dear Ms. Lonelylegs:

My father found a bookmark in an old book store that says *You Are What You Eat.* But here on Ishi Darkfall, we eat our parents after they die because we are so awfully short on other protein. So what I want to know is, does this mean I'm going to turn into my father. He is the planet's most conservative dwerb and I would positively *die* first. But my mother, who I love dearly, is always after me to clean my plate. So while this isn't a problem yet — my father is still incredibly healthy — it's going to be. What should I do?

(signed) Not Very Hungry

Dear Not Very:

Of course you should clean your plate. Think of the poor starving Martians. Besides, you are going to turn into your father anyway. Everyone does. Why, every time I open my mouth, *my* mother comes out and I am not on Ishi Darkfall and she's buried in a little container under the beech tree in our back yard. That's just life, kid. And death. So lean back, floss well, and enjoy it.

(signed) Ms. Lonelylegs

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Dear Ms Lonelylegs:

There's a real popular bunch of celeries stalking our planet, and all the kids are trying to act just like them. Only I'm not sure I want to veg out with the rest. But, like, I don't want to be totally without friends, so what should I do?

(signed) Cool as a Cuke

Dear Cool:

Acting like someone else — whether animal, vegetable, mineral, or Martian — only makes you stupid, not popular. Next time one of your erstwhile friends sidles up to you and whispers "Celery dance?" just reply "Lettuce not" and leaf it at that.

(signed) Ms. Lonelylegs

Dear Ms. Lonelylegs:

Your answers have been getting stranger and stranger. They aren't really helping me anymore. And I need all the help I can get. If I don't pull my grades up, my parents have promised they will ship me off the planet to be put to work in the mines. And none of my friends are there.

(signed) Minor Miner

Dear M&M:

It's the job, not the answers, that are getting strange. But if you think they aren't helping you, they aren't helping me either. Believe it or not, as of tomorrow, my term as Ms. Lonelylegs is done. I have been fired, let go, sacked, given the boot, terminated, finished off, done for, given the *coup de grace*. And that's my fifth job in two years. I guess I'll be seeing you in the mines, kid. But don't worry, what's mine is yours-haha! And we're sure to have lots of good conversations. After all, that's what friends are for, are they not?

(signed) Ms. Lonelylegs

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Geoffrey A. Landis is both a physicist and an award-wining short story writer. His first collection of stories will appear in a month or so from Pulphouse Publishing. Geoff's scientific skills come to play in this off-beat story about a laboratory experiment with a very specific purpose.

Laboratory Procedure

By Geoffrey A. Landis

FRANK GORDON LOVED his big Harley. He liked them quiet, and his was the quietest bike he'd ever heard. It had a special custom muffler he'd gotten from a specialty shop in California; it was so quiet it was frightening. Gordo liked the way it would come up on you without warning, like a shape coming out of a nightmare. He gunned it, coming around the ramp onto 82 at almost eighty, heading for Brigadoon's.

Brig's was the biker bar. There were already half a dozen choppers parked outside. Gordo put his next to them and walked into the dimly lit interior. A couple of the guys greeted him. He picked a stool at the bar next to Big Al and ordered a beer. Gordo and Al were almost opposites: Al big and sloppy, Gordo slender and neat. Al was built like a football player gone to seed, but uglier

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and meaner. In contrast to Gordo's meticulously brushed suede, Al habitually wore a black leather jacket with ripped sleeves festooned with chrome studs. He was a nasty son of a bitch. They got along perfectly.

He looked Gordo up and down. "You're smiling. Bet you had some fun today."

"Damn straight."

"Ha. Way you use 'em up, pretty soon there ain't gonna be any left. What'cha lookin' at next?"

"I ain't worried. There's a chicken I got my eyes on, a real fine piece. Little-mama type. She gonna squirm real good when I stick it in. Real good." He nudged Al in the ribs and pointed to the TV. "Hey, listen to that. They talking 'bout me."

". . . and it looks as if the Providence serial rapist has claimed yet another victim, this one in Central Falls. Details at ten."

As the commercial came on, Al and Gordo chuckled, as if at a private joke.

Katherine Tabor sat back in her chair, sipped her coffee, and watched David Kantrowitz tinker with the microscope. If there were a Nobel prize for tinkering, she thought, he'd certainly be a contender. The X-ray microscope had been designed for metallurgy. He'd modified the sample chamber to accept hydrated samples — wet goo, like the nuclei of living cells — so it could do biological crystallography. With some help from the computer postdoc that he'd persuaded Irwald to hire, he'd hooked the microscope interface to a PC networked into the Cray. The Cray crunched the datastream, extracted the DNA sequences from the mess of data, and then followed the DNA forward into the coded proteins.

Kate didn't know much about X-ray microscopes — computers either, for that matter — but she knew DNA backward, forward, and sideways. What they'd put together was easily the world's fastest DNA sequencer.

She thought about inviting him over to her apartment and seeing what he could do with her broken toaster, but she wasn't sure if she was ready to deal with whatever it would be that he would make out of it. Or if she was ready to deal with *him* — not that he wasn't kind of cute in an awkward, but tall and dark-haired, way. Not awkward when working with equipment, though, not at all.

An automated DNA sequencer. Now *that* was really something.

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Nancy wasn't too surprised when Mrs. Gundich didn't meet her at the door. Normally, if Mrs. Gundich had to leave early, she'd give a call to the bank to let her know, but occasionally things came up without warning. Chrissy was old enough to take care of herself for an hour. Nancy fished out her key and let herself in. "Christine? I'm home. Hello? Chrissy?" No answer. She walked into the kitchen.

She saw the knife first, then the man behind it. The stranger held it at Christine's throat. The child was wide-eyed with terror, struggling to say something, but the adhesive tape over her mouth didn't let her. The man had a mask on, so she couldn't see his face. Then she saw Mrs. Gundich, gagged and blindfolded, bound tightly to a kitchen chair with strapping tape.

"Hey there, pretty mama," the man said, in a surprisingly soft tone. "If you're real good and behave yourself just right, maybe I'll leave your little girl alone. I think we could both have a little fun, don't you? Now, why don't you just start out by taking off your clothes? *Now*."

"The sad fact of the world," Kate wrote, "is that it is far eaiser to break something than to fix it. It is much easier for a virus to cause a disease than it is for us to cure one. To cause a disease requires one to attack only one vulnerable point; to prevent one, we have to defend them all. So if we know only, say, 1 percent of all there is to know about human biochemistry, we don't know nearly enough to cure diseases; but we know plenty enough to cause them."

She stopped and looked at what she'd written. That wasn't what she wanted to say. She deleted the last paragraph and started again.

"Contrary to popular opinion, viruses are the most highly evolved, and the most highly efficient, living organisms on the planet." She looked at it. Better. "They are built to reproduce, and, given the right conditions, are nearly perfect at doing so. Causing disease is at most a side effect: in terms of evolutionary success, a virus doesn't want to harm its host." She thought about that one for a moment. A virus doesn't *want* anything, strictly speaking. But let it stand. Her thesis committee would know what she meant. "Now, consider taking a virus and making genetic modifications. Our modifications can't help the viruses at replication; Mother Nature has already worked a billion years to make them very efficient at

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that. The modifications must be harmful to the virus. The point, however, is that, in general, modifications will also be harmful to the host. At best, we only modify exactly *how* they make people sick." She looked at it again. Still not quite what she wanted to say, but what the heck. If she kept deleting every paragraph after she wrote it, she'd *never* get the thesis written.

Time to get to the lab and check her cultures anyway. She saved the file and headed for the door.

Mr. Gundich was beginning to get annoyed. It was fine with him if Hilda earned a little extra pocket money baby-sitting, but they had tickets to the opera, and she still hadn't come home. He tried the number once more. Still busy. What in the *world* could they be doing over there?

If he waited any longer, they'd be late for sure. He was getting really angry now. He decided to get in the car and go over himself.

SHE HADN'T been any trouble. Gordo had her blindfolded and strapped down to the kitchen table real good. He removed her bra and pink nylon panties with his knife, caressing her softly with the edge, not quite hard enough to draw blood. He took off his mask and was about to unzip his pants, when he noticed that she had somehow managed to work the blindfold off. He reached over and picked up the knife.

"Now, that wasn't a very smart idea, little mama, was it?" he said softly. He put the blade up to the side of his face and rubbed it slowly against his cheek. "I wouldn't want you to be able to identify me, now would I? Just what do you think I should do now?" Her eyes rolled up in terror. He grinned. "I'm sure I'll think of something. But first. . . ." He put the knife down again and started to unbuckle his belt.

Outside, a car started to honk. First a couple of short honks, then one continuous blast. It went on and on. A dog started barking.

"Shit." Gordo walked over to the window, crouched down where he couldn't be seen, and pulled aside a corner of the drapes. An old guy in a blue monster Caddy (the kind he hated) was looking over at the house and leaning on the horn. To either side, neighbors were opening their windows and shouting. The old guy shouted back, but kept right on leaning on the horn. Two guys from across the street walked out to get on his case. Good

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for them; hope they pound his ass. The old guy let off the horn to argue, gesturing toward the house. After a moment, all three of them started walking up to the front of the house.

Damn. Had she locked the front door behind her when she came in? He couldn't remember. He crept quietly down the cellar stairs and out the back door the way he'd gotten in. The Harley was still there in the alley, hidden behind the dumpsters. He kicked it to life and made his escape as the men tried the front door.

The police didn't catch up with him until Monday morning, when she picked his photo out from the file.

Sitting around the lab Tuesday morning, drinking coffee, everybody was talking about the news.

"Castrate the worm, that's what they should do," said Kate. "With a chain saw. Give the slimy little nematode a batch of his own medicine."

"And then dip him in boiling asphalt," said Jake.

"Hey, guys, come off it," David said. "The man's sick. He can't help it. They should lock him up, sure, but let's don't get too sicko ourselves, O.K.?"

"Well, what do you think they should do, huh? Put him in jail and have him eligible for parole in a year or two? You think that's punishment?"

"No. You want to know what I think they should do to the guy?" He paused a moment and looked around.

"Actually, I don't give a damn," said Jake, "but I suppose you're going to tell us all anyway."

"Well, for one time in your life, Jake my buddy, you're right. Now, I think they should take the guy and give him an injection. A special injection. Every time the guy gets a hard-on, wham. He gets real weak. Can't stand up. *Now* let's see him go around raping people."

Kate looked up. "Say, you may have something there. You could do even better than that. Tie it in to the adrenaline level. Happens only when he's excited. Double whammo."

"You guys," said Jake, shaking his head. "Great drug you got there. Funny, guess I missed seeing it in the *PDR* last time I looked."

"Not a drug, a disease." said Kate. "Say a genetically tailored virus, specially made for the purpose. Responds to the gene pattern. Be a little tricky to make it but it could be done."

"Say, I like that," said David. "Designer diseases."

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"Think so? How you gonna get something like that past the NIH watchdog committee? They scream bloody murder when we even ask for permission to do a little gene doctoring to *cure* people. You think they'll let somebody have permission to release a *disease*? No way, José."

"Well they ought to. Save the public a lot of money; they wouldn't have to keep the guy in prison. Make the bug trigger only on a single gene pattern. To anybody else, it would be harmless."

"Yeah, and try to convince the NIH of that. Besides, who could tailor a virus that precisely?"

"Kate looked at him. "*We* could."

Jake looked thoughtful. "You know, if we all pooled our talents together, I think maybe we could at that. David on the mike; your skill at splicing . . . maybe we could. But I'll tell you — nobody else. None of the other labs have all the right kinds of people in the same place."

"Wouldn't even be dangerous," said Dave. "We've got the sequencer; we could key it so tightly to this one guy's genotyope that, even if it got loose, it would never infect somebody else in a million years. —"

The doorknob turned, and the group scrambled to pretend to look busy. Dr. Irwald walked in. "Talking about the rapist, eh." He laughed. Maybe he'd heard some of the conversation. He tossed a newspaper down on the lab bench and left again. "Take a look at that."

Dave walked over and looked at the headline:

VICTIM DROPS CHARGES AGAINST ALLEGED SERIAL RAPIST

There was a sudden silence when he showed up at Brig's. The mirror behind the bar reflected him darkly, and in it, Gordo could see a dozen eyes watch him walk up to the bar. He walked confidently. He figured that, in a pinch, he and Big Al could take down any six of the weekend outlaws. The bartender he wasn't so sure about, but hell, this was his place, and damned if he'd be driven out without making trouble.

The bartender picked up a whiskey bottle and started polishing it with his rag. "Heard 'bout you on the teevee. Having some trouble with your old lady?"

He shrugged with elaborate casualness. "Some. Not anymore."

"She over eighteen?"

He gave the bartender a sharp look. "Damn straight. I like 'em young, sure, but not *that* young."

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"Well, all right, then." The bartender put the bottle back behind the bar and drew him a beer. "No babyfuckers drinking at this bar."

He could feel the tension drain away. A couple of the regulars bought him beers. He looked around at the crowd and found Big Al at a table in the back. He walked up to him and punched him in the arm. "You?"

Big Al leaned back in his chair, way back until the chair almost tipped over, and showed his yellow teeth. "Yep."

"Thanks, big guy."

"No problem, amigo." Big Al smiled. "Anything for a friend."

"So, tell."

"You shoulda seen it, man. You just shoulda been there when she saw that puppy. The pigs put her in this motel room, you see, said it would keep her safe until she testified, you know it?" Big Al had visited the motel room and left her a present, a basset-hound pup that he'd bought from a couple of kids selling puppies in one of the rich suburbs. He described the look the little mama's face had when she found it in the motel room. He'd left it dissected across the motel's double bed. The puppy had still been whimpering and trying to lap his hand when he left it. "Now, *that* changed her mind about talking, real quick," he said, and laughed. "You gonna go back to it, or hang low for while?"

"Hang low, I think. Maybe cruise around a bit out of town, if you know what I mean?" Big Al laughed.

Yeah, hang low. On the other hand, there was this chicken he'd had his eye on lately, some sort of researcher worked at the university hospital. Hell, he'd seen her walk back toward the student section of town a lot of nights after midnight. It would be so easy. Wouldn't hardly be rape, even. On the streets after midnight, it was just like she'd asked for it, how he figured it. Not hardly even sport at all. He smiled. Yeah.

IT HADN'T even been very hard, although the lab work took two solid days of straight sleepless effort, sandwiched into bits and pieces of time between "real" work.

The police laboratory had a blood sample from the alleged rapist, and had sent it over to the university hospital for analysis. Kate simply walked in dressed as a lab tech and logged it out. Dave sequenced it and programmed the attack-DNA sequence (with some computer-work help from Herbert, who wasn't in on the conspiracy), and Kate spliced RNA

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together to the specs Dave came up with.

The plan they'd finally come up with involved lactic-acid poisoning in the muscles to produce the weakness whenever the trigger stimulus was present, along with the production of a detumescence hormone and a few enzymes that deadened sexual desire. They'd managed to tie it to female pheromone as a trigger, as well as the usual biochemical tags of sexual arousal — "Just in case he decided to try the other side of the street," said Dave. "No way this sicko is going to rape *any*body after we've gotten at him. Are you ready with the host virus?"

"Got the undergrad assistant mass-producing it in the cell culture."

"Good enough. What are you using? Influenza?"

Kate shook her head. "Epstein-Barr virus."

"EB? Why that?"

"Well, first, because it cultivates well in human tissue and is mostly harmless. But mainly because we have a good sample available that's already well characterized."

"Mostly harmless?" said David. "What's the mostly part?"

"Hell, if he doesn't like it, let him sue me."

When Kate had the handmade RNA ready, she gave it to Jake, who used a dash of reverse transcriptase according to the method he'd worked out, and spliced it into the ready virions. He and the assistant then mass-produced the altered virus in the tissue culture.

When enough had been made, they spun down a pure sample and gave it to Dave to sequence. Kate and Jake waited anxiously as Dave whistled tunelessly over the X-ray microscope. Finally he leaned back from his console, smiled, and gave them a thumbs-up. "Per-*fect*-o. Not a codon out of place."

"We're in business," said Kate. "Let's boogie."

He'd followed his chicken coming home late. She was begging for it, all right. It was after two, and the street was deserted. He cruised around ahead of her, and as she passed the alley, he made his move.

Or tried to. His legs collapsed right under him, and he hit the asphalt with a grunt. It was as if all his muscles had turned to wet newspaper, like he had just tried to run a marathon carrying his Harley on his back. He was on his face in the alley before he'd even known he was hit.

She'd walked right on past; hadn't even glanced at him. He crawled

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back to his hog and threw up.

What the hell? He couldn't figure it, not then, not later in the week.

Hang low was right. Way low. He could joke and pretend everything was the same, but, tell the truth, looked like cruise around a bit was about *all* he was likely to do. Christ, if he even *thought* about doing it to a chick, he got the wobbles and had to sit down. Couldn't get a hard-on even with a pro, and for *damn* sure that means you got trouble. He'd even descended to the level of having to use his own hand for relief, and he hadn't been forced to that extreme since he'd gotten his first switchblade at seventeen.

Maybe the damn cops had put some kind of drug into his food? Would the cops do something like that? Rough you up a bit if no reporters were watching and they thought they could get away with it — sure, that was just part of the good times. But he'd never even *heard* of anything like this.

Hell, he must be getting old. Could he have shot his wad so often he'd used it all up? Everybody knew geezers lost it long before they started taking Geritol and listening to ooze music.

Maybe he ought to just sell the hog and move down to Florida. Get a job, maybe do car repair or something. No way he could keep pretending, hanging with the rowdies much longer — pretty soon one of them would bring in a loose mama, and then he'd be shown up pretty, for sure, for sure.

The only thought he had was to go on a drunk. A long, ugly, three-day, falling-down-stupid drunk. For sure.

It couldn't possibly have worked, Kate insisted. They'd been too carried away by the excitement of the illicit experiment to realize that. It was common knowledge that a rapist isn't really interested in sex, but in domination and humiliation of a helpless victim.

But after two weeks of carefully watching the news and scanning the headlines for signs of the serial rapist, she had to admit it apparently *had* worked. One day when Dr. Irwald was gone to Washington looking for funding, Jake brought balloons and a beer ball to the lab for an impromptu party to celebrate. The three of them agreed that Irwald should be kept strictly in the dark, but they filled Herbert and the undergraduate assistant, Beth, in on the conspiracy after both of them swore secrecy.

One thing led to another, and somehow the party didn't break up until about two. Jake fell asleep on the couch in the corner and couldn't be woken up. Beth and Herbert had both left a bit earlier, and Dave staggered

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back to his apartment trying to whistle around a bad case of hiccups. Kate was left to carry the debris from the party out to the garbage. She dumped it on the pile of week-old newspapers, when a name in the discarded paper caught her eye. She pulled it out of the bin and took it back to the lab.

The news wasn't on the front page, and it didn't mention rape at all. Just that the motorcycle had been doing well over a hundred when it hit the bridge embankment.

So it turned out to be a death sentence, after all.

At last, Kate turned off the lights in the lab and stood alone, looking into the darkness at the glow of power-supply lights and indicators.

"But it doesn't stop here," she whispered. "That was only the beginning. We can do anything to anyone, anywhere, anytime. We can assassinate presidents, decimate armies, dictate rules to popes. We're, we're masters of the world. The secret masters of the world." She was silent for a while. "But where does it all end? Where in hell does it all end?"

The lab answered with the quiet whirr of vacuum pumps and the dim glow of lights. After a moment she closed the door and went home.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 46: *In Which We Bend So Far Over Backwards To Be Unbiased That You Can See The Nose Hairs Quiver With Righteousness*

EVERY NOW and then, even these days, I'll find myself of an odd evening in company with friends who just want to hang out around the house; maybe we've had dinner; maybe they've come in from out of town and they're too bushed to make a night of it, out and around Hollywood. And we find ourselves up in my big office, sitting around in the gloaming, perhaps one low-wattage light shaping shadows, and someone will say, "Put on something interesting," by which she or he means: hey, mister music buff, play something we don't know. By which he or she means: *étonne-moi.*

And every now and then, even these days, I'll smile with a secret pleasure — because it's a pleasure returned to me after a great many seasons of having been denied me — and I'll say, "Oh, okay . . . listen to this. See if you can tell me who's singing on this album."

Then I go to that bin of record albums within arm's reach of my typewriter, where I keep the couple hundred albums that no amount of time or fashion has managed to render hincty for me — a pair of Jack Teagarden sides on which he does Willard Robison blues; Big Miller's first set for Columbia; half a dozen David Grisman lps, a few with Grappelli; The Crusaders with B.B. King and the Royal Philharmonic recorded live at Royal Festival Hall in London in 1981; Stevie Ray Vaughan; Blind Blake; Bob Dorough and Jackie Paris and The Tango Project and Mike Nesmith's *From a Radio Engine to the Photon Wing;* lots of Django, Gerry Mulligan, Dr. John's *City Lights,* and Van Dyke Parks; Otis and Lenny Welch and Alan Price and the only album I think that was ever record-

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ed by this astonishing young woman named Judy Roderick; and Aretha's first album and that heartbreaking Chet Baker with strings set — and with great affection and expectation I slip onto the turntable an album I've played so many times it's soft as glove leather with groove erosion, and I crank the gain to about 5 (which is maybe a fourth of the way around, but enough to let the Quad electrostatic screens pick up everything), and in the slippery darkness there comes this ecstatic, mesmerizing jazz voice doing tricks with Duke Ellington's and Juan Tizol's "Caravan" that sends the tectonic plates of your heart sliding and gliding. It's a Teo Macero arrangement with Hal McKusick on clarinet and alto sax, Nick Travis on trumpet, and a cadre of some of the finest jazzmen of the mid-Fifties . . . but it's that unbelievable voice that paralyzes everybody in the room.

You've never heard anything like it.

And when the track is ended, I move the arm to "Cabin in the Sky" and then "Angel Eyes" and finally I let them hear this guy perform the absolutely most beautiful version of Duke's "Prelude to a Kiss" orchestrated by John Lewis of the MJQ when he was at the peak of his talent . . . and I let it slide into silence . . . and everyone sits in darkness having been caressed and indulged and taken away from there for a few minutes . . . and finally after a while, even these days, someone will murmur, "Jeezus gawd who the hell was *that!!!*" And I smile gently in the shadows and I say, "Johnny Mathis."

And they can't believe it, because all they know of Johnny Mathis is the commercial crap he's recorded for the past three decades or so, all the oleaginous makeout music they used to get them in the mood, and what I've just taken off the turntable is a jazz voice so sinuous, so subtle and supple, backed by arrangements so smart and so hip they are timeless, that they think I'm yanking their chains. And they come and pick up the worn, frayed album sleeve, and there he is:

Mathis when he was nineteen years old, fresh out of San Francisco, recorded on Columbia by George Avakian, with a set of songs arranged and conducted by the likes of Gil Evans and John Lewis and Teo and Manny Albam and Bob Prince, most of which are names my visitors don't know were traffic-stoppers before Dee Dee Ramone was out of swaddling.

It was Mathis's first album. He'd been singing around San Francisco; he'd done some college gigs; and they'd found him bigtime at Ann's 440 Club up above the old Barbary Coast line; and they'd schlepped

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him to New York; and nestled him like a diamond in this recording session setting of the best, the very best in the world. And he done jazz. Not that pop schmaltz that dripped ooze off the albums so you had to wear workgloves or the platter'd slip out of your hands, that lachrymose trick-up payroll music that made him a star and a millionaire and a voice I didn't want to hear.

But every once in a time, even these days, I repeat what I used to do in those first days of his arrival, and I astound a whole new bunch of listeners the way I did then, as if it were thirty years ago again. It's a pleasure denied me for a long time. And I'm struck by this subhuman very-human failing most of us share, which is that when we've discovered some writer or singer or piquant little restaurant, and nobody else ever heard of it (or them), we revel in it (or them), and we laud them (or it) to the skies, and we feel like a *pezzonovante* because we've shared this unknown treasure.

And then everyone else discovers the singer, or the writer, or tells their uptown friends, and the restaurant is jammed and the prices climb and you can't get a seat without you gotta wait a week for some tightassed maitre d' to deign to notice you and they're doing numbers with arugula and radicchio, and then one afternoon some half-wit sufi-faced systems analyst in a J. Press suit confides in you that he's reading *your* writer and have you ever heard of this guy, or he's been listening to this really hot new CD on his beamer's surround-a-scape and have you ever heard this guy, or he can't wait to take you to dinner at this oh so chic and ultimately inward little cafe off the beaten track where simply *everybody* is eating and have you heard of this treasure . . . and the next thing you know you've buried a paving stone in the gink's brainpan and they're dragging you off for trial, and even in the joint there are cons telling you how you ought to get with such and such a writer or singer or (when you get sprung) swell nifty little restaurant.

And the treasure has been solen from you, because now *everyone* knows about it and, like a lover who comes to see his paramour and has to take a number, you despise and revile that which you adored when it was yours and yours alone.

You hear yourself running down the artist, trying to puff yourself up by saying how this new book is just commercial tripe and that's why the writer is sudddenly, for the first time, on the bestseller list, and the new book isn't a shadow of what the writer created when s/he lived in poverty. And you're saying s/he has "sold out" because you're a jilted

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lover. And unless you wrench yourself up like a man on a gibbet, and slam yourself mentally and face the fact that you're being irrational, you're being a righteous poop; and unfair; and unworthy.

I went to see the world premiere of THE ROCKETEER (Disney Pictures) the other night.

I've been waiting maybe five years for it.

The creator of The Rocketeer is a swell guy named Dave Stevens. He is about as gentle and decent a young man as you'd ever want to meet. Looks a whole lot like the actor they've got playing Cliff Secord, The Rocketeer. That's because when Dave drew the first installments of the comic for the long-defunct *Pacific Presents* back in 1982-84, he drew himself.

I've known Dave a long time. When the first five chapters of The Rocketeer continuity were pulled together for the splendid Graphitti Designs graphic novel, the thirty dollar signed limited edition, in 1985, with that remarkable cameo illustration of Doug Wildey as Peevy, Dave as Cliff Secord, and Betty Page as curvaceous Betty, Cliff's girl friend adorning the cover, it was I whom Dave asked to write the introduction.

The point is: I *love* Dave Stevens's Rocketeer.

I love his artwork, over which he labors like a beanfield hand, bitching endlessly that the litho plant put too much red in the skintones when they printed it. I love the storyline with its absolute 1938 authenticity, becase Dave is a maniac for perfection of background. I love the playful references to Doc Savage and his associates, who turn up in the story so unexpectedly that Stevens never calls them by name and you sit there wondering *is that who I think it is!* I love the fact that, like Eastman and Laird of Turtles fame, here is this talented kid who worked his butt off, and unlike most hard workers who slave away for an in-group audience and never make a dime, Dave has hit it big and may have a chance at the big score. I love it that this major film company spared no expense in bringing his creation to life and Dave is riding the crest of the wave and everyone is proclaiming him the flavor of the month! I love it all.

Which makes me the single most untrustworthy critic of the film you will encounter this summer season. How the hell can I be relied on to tell you the straight of this film, without I'm either goofy prejudiced in its favor because of all the baggage I'm hauling, or bitter rotten shitfaced cynical about it because now *everybody* is eating there and I can't get a seat?

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Hell, I wouldn't trust me as far as I could throw Siskel and Ebert.

Nonetheless, it falls to me to report on *The Rocketeer*, because it is certainly going to be the big fantasy film of the season, and let me tell you I've worried this matter some serious time before I selected the m.o. I will now forthwith describe.

I will state baldly and shamelessly that I enjoyed the hell out of this movie. If you have no negative feelings about being a dirty-faced seven-year-old kid at a Saturday afternoon matinee, then you cannot save yourself from falling headfirst into this flick and swimming right along with Cliff and Peev and swarthy Eddie Valentine and nefarious Neville Sinclair and pneumatic Jenny Blake (who is chickenshit Disney's substitute for Betty) and all the rest of Dave Stevens's characters in a knockdown special effects and slamdumk adventure extravaganza that will fricasee your eyeballs with action and derring-do very much like that you enjoyed when your heart was younger and your taste was too good to be refined.

And having said that, I will now point out every error I could spot in the movie.

I think I'm doing the right thing here. This has not been an easy path to select. But Dave Stevens will understand.

ONE GROUND-RULE. *The Rocketeer*, a graphic novel, was written and drawn by Dave Stevens. *The Rocketeer*, a motion picture, was written for the screen by Danny Bilson and Paul De Meo from a story by both of them with William Dear. In fairness, they have been true down the line to Dave's original. And where they have deviated, their choices have been inspired. (For instance, the excellent substitution of Howard Hughes for Doc Savagé, which makes for some of the sharpest moments of the replotting.) But as I must admit that I have found Bilson and De Meo's work on the tv version of *The Flash* moribund and pallid, so do I attribute the flaws in the film at least 50% to their contributions.

In short, I'm discussing here a movie and not a graphic novel. I'm nitpicking at a committee-product, not the singular conception of the original creator.

The basic flaw of the film is in the characterization of the hero, Cliff Secord. In the graphic novel Dave made Cliff more than endearing. He was charming. He was naive, but steady; headstrong, but not a doofus. In the film Bill Campbell has been given a character who is not only foolish and foolhardy,

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he's imprudent, idiotic, sappy and often plain stupid. It makes for a hollow core to the adventure. Let me give you a major f'instance. (This is a Bilson-De Meo departure from the canon.)

At the beginning of the story, Cliff and his mechanic-inventor pal Peevy have been working for three years on readying the GeeBee racer for the National Air Show. They have sunk every cent they possess into it. Cliff takes the plane up for a test flight. Meanwhile, Eddie Valentine's pistoleros — who have swiped the Cirrus X-3, an experimental strap-on rocket pack designed by Hughes — are being high-speed chased by the FBI in the vicinity. Secord flies directly over them. He can see that the fleeing car has a guy in the open rumble seat who is spraying the chasing vehicle with a Thompson submachine gun. He can see that the pursuing vehicle has a guy leaning out the window firing a pistol at the fleeing car. He can see this, and we can see that he sees it. Now any rational person, hero or otherwise, having sunk three years and everything he and his friends possess in the plane he's flying, would have done a barrel roll and gotten the hell out of there. But (and this may be in the inept direction of Joe Johnston, a former artist, designer and Artistic Director for Lucasfilm's Industrial Light and Magic, whose only previous directorial credit is *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, which ain't exactly *The Magnificent Ambersons*) Cliff flies low over them, for no particular reason we can discern. He "buzzes" them, in effect, though that's probably the last thing Johnston and the scenarists wanted us to think.

So Secord gets his plane shot up by the goon in the fleeing roadster, the plane crashes, burns, explodes into dead dreams;everything is lost. It thus makes the imbecile protagonist, whom we're to perceive as being of heroic stature, a simpleton, a reckless jerk who has bumpishly put in harm's way the single most important object in his (and his friends') life. Everything that follows is as a result of his stupid curiosity, his doofus irresponsibility.

But wait, as they say on the Ginsu commercials, there's more!

Not too much later, the thugs of Eddie Valentine (played to the hilt by Paul Sorvino, whose appearances were much too brief), looking for Secord, come to the Bulldog Cafe, where all the airfield chaps hang out. They grab Secord's best friend, his closest buddy, the staunch and admirable Peevy (an antic and, but for one inapt line, charming performance by Alan Arkin). They drag him over to the short order griddle and they start to press his face down onto the red-hot metal. Tell

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us who and where Secord is! (Cliff is sitting right there.) Peevy won't talk. no one else talks, either. Including Secord, who is sitting *right there!* He makes a move to pick up a ketchup bottle, but one of the mobsters holds a gun on him. And Peevy's face gets closer and closer. Secord says nothing. No one says anything.

At the last instant, one of the goons sees a clue written on the wall beside the telephone. It is utterly gratuitous and happenstance, the kind of last-instant save that makes one groan. But the lameness of the plotting — a clear example of the basic weaknesses of Bilson and De Meo's abilities — the kind of inability to plot well enough that would preclude writing yourself into that corner, but not the sort of thing these guys were taught in "film school" (in this case both got their degrees in Theater Arts at Cal State San Bernardino) — isn't the quibble here. The awfulness of their lame plotting is that it makes Secord seem not just a miserable liverguts coward, but willing to sacrifice his best friend rather than risk his own ass. There's his mentor, the sweet and gentle Peevy, about to get his face seared on a greasy grille unless he finks on Secord, and he won't spill the beans . . . but Secord doesn't make a move!

These two pivotal moments, plus the endlessly childish and essentially dopey behavior of Secord, makes for a sense of impropriety that such a lox should be gifted with the rocket pack and the secret identity of The Rocketeer, the traditional "magical appurtenances" of this sort of legend. The young knight must never be given the cloak of invisibility, the winged horse, and the enchanted sword unless he is worthy. One does not put the golden greaves and mystical helm on a plowboy who is a craven.

And if the homage to Rondo Hatton, the villain of one of my favorite films, 1946's *House of Horrors*, is wonderful; if the dead-ringerism of the nightclub's clarinet-playing bandleader to Artie Shaw is terrific; if the Billy Strayhorn opening to Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood" is spectacularly well-placed; if Hughes and his Spruce Goose are a hoot; if the tongue-in-cheek destruction of the last four letters of the HOLLYWOODLAND sign is a must-see filmic moment . . . these joys are unbalanced by such silly (and avoidable) gaffes as these:

• Secord, posing as a waiter, sets a soup bowl containing a note that is writen in ink in front of Jenny as she dines with the villain Neville Sinclair at the South Seas Club. The note says: Meet me by the big fish *now*! See sees it, is startled, looks

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up, recognizes Cliff, and he pours soup over the note to conceal it. Later, Sinclair (Timothy Dalton) spies the floating paper when Jenny has left the table, fishes it out, and reads it, thus tipping to her charade in leaving, and thus alerted to Secord's presence at the Club. Except . . . in 1938 there was no such thing as a ballpoint pen, no such thing as fountain pen ink that wouldn't run, no way that note could have been read. It would have turned to a smear. (No, I've checked it out, gentle arguists; it wasn't written in pencil. It was in ink.)

• Early on, someone (either Cliff to Peevy or Peevy to Cliff, I believe) looks at the Cirrus X-3 and asks what it is. The other answers, "A rocket pack, like in the comic books." No way. In 1938 there were only a few comic books in existence, and none of them featured people using rocket packs. What he *meant* to say — but Bilson and De Meo are too young to know — was "just like in the comic *strips*" because the reference is to Buck Rogers, who *was* the model for such rocketman concepts.

• With the possible exception (I'm told) of one busboy, nowhere in this film is there a black face. Now it may be that Disney wished to recreate the feel of 1938 Los Angeles, but since the original founder of Los Angeles (after the Mexicans) was a black man, I feel certain no one's sense of authenticity would have been jarred had there been *some* indication, however minuscule, of the traditional racial diversity of LA's population. I'm not talking Political Correctness here, or even tokenism . . . I'm talking simply The Way It Was, Is, Always Will Be!

• Two points about Jennifer Connolly, the young woman who plays Jenny. One may seem churlish, the other has to do with costuming. On the former point, I risk the sort of opprobrium that critic John Simon drew when he correctly pointed out that Liza Minnelli looks like a plucked chicken, when I say that Ms. Connolly has the hugest teeth in the civilized world, a set of choppers that Bucky Beaver would envy; and every time she skinned back her lips and unsheathed those ivories, it was as if she were advertising Pepsodent. Now I realize that since several less-than-veiled references were made to the size of Ms. Connolly's breasts, we were supposed to fixate on her cleavage; but her secondary sex characteristics were put in the shade by the dazzling effulgence of her blazing bicuspids. Were it one of director Johnston's fortes to handle actors well, he might have noted that when Ms. Connolly did the tooth

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thing all the background was lost in the glare, and we might have been spared that aspect of her otherwise pleasing manner.

As to the costuming error, it is one we are *meant* to notice. I mentioned that our attention is regularly drawn to Ms. Connolly's chest. Well, they have her in a tight sweater at one stage, and we can see the outline of nipples. In a modern drama or comedy, no big deal. But in 1938 not only were women still following the fashion of flatness, as represented by such stars as Myrna Loy (who is mentioned), to the extent that they often bound their breasts to appear trimmer, but a "nice girl" like Jenny — and we are endlessly reminded that she *is* a nice girl, no matter how venally she wishes to be a movie star — would *never* have worn a bra that permitted the outline of her nipples to protrude. Remember that when Marilyn Vance-Straker gets her Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design next year.

• The unbelievable hokiness of having a hundred Nazi commandos in ninja outfits suddenly jump out of the bushes at the Griffith Observatory. Not even a premiere evening audience, totally going for the ambience and grandiose exaggeration of the pulp-magazine plot, not even they could restrain a groan of disbelief. If you're going to rely on the willing suspension of disbelief of an audience to con them with this kind of florid storyline and pictorial, you'd better make damned sure you don't cross the line into ridiculousness, which is where Bilson and De Meo and Johnston went sashaying with the Nazi attack squadron.

The astute reader will now take the patented cortical-thalamic pause of A.E. Van Vogt and say, "*These* are your damning negatives? These are the flaws? What a picayune pain in the ass you are, Ellison!" And with the exceptions of the rotten character plotting I mentioned at the outset, you're right. This is piddling stuff. But I said I was an untrustworthy observer on this one, because of vested interests. I've tried to be evenhanded, scrupulous to a fault, beyond fair into ultra-fair . . . but I wouldn't accept for a moment my opinions on this snazzy film. I would doubt the praise, the brickbats, all of it.

If I were you, I'd just go see for myself, and to hell with Ellison's bifurcated balderdash.

And if you want the undiluted stuff, go out and buy the gorgeous graphic novel as done by Dave Stevens. (There are Disney-generated versions, and they're fine, too; but they aren't Stevens. And if you want to see the magic that en-

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sorceled Disney into buying The Rocketeer concept in the first place, it is the Dave Stevens version that burns brightest.) The introduction to the book ain't too dusty, neither.

ANCILLARY MATTERS: All together now, in the voice of the late Heather O'Rourke in *Poltergeist II:* "He's baaaack!"

Yes, I know I've missed column deadline after deadline. But as I told you a few years ago, I've got this crummy illness called Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and, well, sometimes it's worse than others. But I *want* to get back on schedule, and I did promise to be more attentive to schedules, so if you'll be patient, and if you'll take this installment as the beginning of a rededication to regularity, what we might call the Ex-Lax Imperative, I do not think your forbearance will be misplaced.

There have been, as you may have noticed, some big changes around here since last I visited with you. The Noble Fermans have given over the editorial reins to large degree to a person named Rusch. When, late last year, I was approached by my theretofore employers, with the advisement that they were seeking some wretched figurehead personage to accept the rotten remarks and threats of cancellation of subscription if they didn't dump me forthwith, when they confessed that having worked with me for what-is-it something like seven years, and were sick to tears of it all, and needed some peace and quiet in their twilight years, I guffawed at their lack of tenacity, knew I'd at last beaten them into submission, and lived in fear of what mountebank they'd slip in as titular whipping-post. When they selected Ms. Rusch, I was asked for a statement that could be used in a press release. I accomodated twice over. I sent *two* press releases. To my knowledge, neither was used. But I get paid by the word, and I'll be damned if I'll let them go to waste. And besides, I think you ought to know where I stand on the Rusch appointment. So here are the two versions of my position on our new editor:

VERSION A

When advised of Ms. Rusch's selection as the new *F&SF* trailboss, Film Editor Harlan Ellison remarked, "Thank heaven! We were all wondering when Ferman would pack it in. Covering up for his, well, increasingly embarrassing memory-lapses and incontinence was becoming a burden. Not to take anything away from him — he has been a splendid editor since early in the Jurassic — the man has been slipping of late. Hell, he even considered publishing Piers Anthony and Jack Chalker. That was when

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his long-suffering wife, Audrey, and the rest of us who slave for a pittance on the magazine knew he had to be put out to pasture. It'll be good to have someone who can be bribed again at the helm of F&SF. What did you say this guy's name was? Cris Rowsh? Have no idea who he is, but he's got to be more on the ball than Ferman."

VERSION B

When advised of Ms. Rusch's selection as the new *F&SF* editor, the magazine's film critic, Harlan Ellison, said, "This is sensational good news! Kris Rusch combines respect for the traditions of the genre and the magazine with a fresh and uncluttered view of what it takes to keep *F&SF au courant* as we enter a new decade and a new century. Ed Ferman's choice of a talented *woman* demonstrates once again his taste and sagacity. She will certainly be a worthy successor to the chair so prestigiously occupied by Boucher, McComas, Mills, Davidson and, brilliantly, by Ed Ferman. A new day dawns, and I, for one, could not be more pleased."

Next, is the matter of Kathi Maio. If you recall, some months ago I sang the praises of a film critic named Maio, whose perceptions and pluckiness as a filmwatcher I commended to your attention. Well, Ferman and Rusch noted my enthusiasm, and as it seemed I might never again meet a deadline, they wisely decided to adopt a policy of encouraging Ms. Maio to join our happy little band. Her first appearance follows this column.

Let me be candid about this.

I think she's smarter than I am, more insightful than I am; and a damn sight more polite than I am. Which does not mean that she can't kick ass when she chooses. I am a 100% Maio fan, and in the event I screw up and miss a deadline, you can count on an even better dose of film criticism than mine by Ms. Maio's appearances here. That doesn't mean I'm packing it in. By no means. I can still write a line or two, and I have no plans to go away. But there is a need for regularity here, and I cannot think of *anyone* better for the job than Kathi Maio.

Further, let me tell you right now, though she and I have never met, I am by way of considering myself her pal, and if any of you smartasses give her a hard time, you're gonna have to go through me to get to her. There is nothing paternalistic about it; consider it more Athos to her Porthos. But as I am regularly knocked out by her insights (just try this first essay for example) (her conception of why ghost movies are currently so popular is just simple out-and-out brilliant), I would take it as a mark of proper upbringing on your part to give her a chance to get comfy here before you start busting her chops

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the way you do mine.

Like, for instance, R. Metzl of Rock Hill, South Carolina, (among half a dozen others) who picked up on my asides last installment, in which I asked who the hell Ben Gay was, and if there had ever been an Absorbine, Sr.: "I'm sure you know this, and were only playing for comedy, but . . .

"Yes, there *was* a Ben Gay. He was Dr. Benguet and his formula has been popular for many years.

"Absorbine, Sr.? Yeah, also a long time product. It's for horses. I hope this helps."

Now I could dissemble and pretend I knew that. But I didn't. I just thought it was some funny shit. But I thank the lot of you who jumped on my ignorance and set me to rights. Imagine my gratitude.

Which also goes out to Rick Thocker (I *think* that's the spelling; jeez, Rick, what lousy printing you have) of Russen, Kansas (I *think* it's Russen; jeez, Rick, what lousy printing you have), who sends the following advisement:

"I could not help but write to you concerning your March column on the *Back to the Future* movies.

"You wrote Marty's car is a 1985 DeLorean. As owner of such a car, I feel it is my duty to correct you as to the year of manufacture.

"DeLorean automobiles were built from late in 1981 to early in 1983, making a 1985 model impossible."

Yeah, well, you print badly, and you made three grammatical errors that I didn't register here, and anyone who could afford a DeLorean is a smartass anyhow.

It feels good to be back among you. Welcome Kris, welcome Kathi, hi Ed and Audrey, and next time I'm going to do a simply breathtaking piece about *Edward Scissorhands* and a less breathtaking piece about the animated *Lensman* feature, and I've got a whole slew of wonderful visual-type books to recommend.

You simply didn't know when you were well off.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

LOVE AFTER DEATH

I'M NOT sure whether hitting the big five-oh was stressful for Bob Dylan, but it's been hell on the rest of the baby boom generation. *People* even did a story. "The '60s Turn 50," focusing on him and many of the other popular performers (Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez, Rolling Stone Charlie Watts . . .) hitting that momentous birthday this year.

Many of the tributes Bobby Zimmerman and friends are receiving express more than joy at the longevity of their musical careers, however. There's a real sense of panic and dread mixed in with the hoopla. (*People*'s heading for their story was "Oh No!" and was captioned "The times, they are a-aging.") If the youthful voice of the '60s protest can reach such an advanced age, then the rest of us must be—gulp—getting old, too.

If we're lucky. Along with the graying of the baby boom generation, events like the ongoing tragedy of AIDS, with thousands and thousands of this world's citizens wasting away and dying in their "prime," remind us daily of just how fragile this life is. And when mortality is too much on our minds, many of us turn to thinking about immortality. Newsweeklies tell us that younger adults are returning to organized religion in a big way, but people aren't just taking their concerns about the afterlife to church. They're taking them to their neighborhood movie theater, as well.

Ghost, that schmaltzy and silly 1990 mega-hit, touched the American movie-going public in a way that astounded the critics, and even the people who made it. But with 20-20 hindsight, the film's success isn't so surprising. It's slogan was "Believe," and that's exactly what people are aching to do. We want to believe that love survives death, and that a good man will receive his just reward in the hereafter—even if heaven is only a crowded

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land of glowing soap bubbles.

Although *Ghost*, with its special effects from ILM and Available Light Limited, its weepy love story, and the cut-through-the-mawkishness of Whoopi Goldberg's comic performance, was the big winner, it's by no means the only film in the last couple of years to deal with what *Ghost*'s author Bruce Joel Rubin has called our "deep spiritual hunger." Rubin's other 1990 release, *Jacob's Ladder*, deals with some of the same issues. And, in the last two years, we've seen many other movies touching, most lightly, some pseudo-seriously, on afterlife and spiritual pay-back. These included *Flatliners*, *Ghost Dad*, *Heart Condition*, *Always*, and the straight-to-tape-atrocities *She's Back* and *Ghosts Can't Do It*.

And now there are three more films, all released in the spring of this year, that contemplate what might happen to a man after he dies. First out is comic auteur Albert Brooks's long-awaited follow-up to his strongest film, a yuppie-angst road picture called *Lost in America* (1985). This year's *Defending Your Life* isn't half as good, because it doesn't capture the anxieties or the foolishness of its young professional hero (as always, played by Brooks himself) half as well. And yet, that's precisely what the movie claims to be about: how our fears control our lives and threaten our chances at a happy eternity.

Brooks plays Daniel Miller, a California ad executive whose life is cut short on his thirty-somethingth birthday. He's just picked up his new BMW convertible and is taking a solitary drive when he runs, head-on, into a bus. The next thing he knows, he is sitting in a wheelchair wearing a hospital johnnie. But this is no hospital. This is Judgement City, a pit-stop in eternity where earthlings—our "Little Brains" as the natives like to call us—come to review the events of one life before moving on to the next.

Judgement City is far from celestial. Although it's built for comfort, it has a distinctly purgatorial feel to it. Production Designer Ida Random, with the help of "subtle effects" experts from Dream Quest Images, created a hereafter that, architecturally, looks like the worst of the here and now. The business of soul-searching is conducted in glass-box office buildings. And amusements (perhaps you'd like Shirley MacLaine to introduce you to an earlier self at the Past Lives Pavilion?) can be found at the malls on the edge of town. And talk about Life in Hell, Daniel's lodgings look just like an airport Holiday Inn.

Upon his arrival, Daniel is told that this environment was created

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especially for people from the Western United States. What it looks like is a sterile version of L.A. — with a much better public transportation system. I'm not sure how comfy a soul from Montana or New Mexico would feel here. And as for racial minorities, I guess they've been deported or interned or something. The dearly departed don't seem to include latinos, asians, gays, or any of the other folks who so contribute to the diversity of the West Coast. Far too many of whom die young.

In fact, except for a topless bar impresario who was shot in the head, Daniel seems to be about the only pre-retirement age male passing through Judgement City. Which explains why Meryl Streep, playing a part-sprite, part-saint named Julia, would bother to give him the time of day. Daniel is her only contemporary. So why not have a little romance, maybe even a little hanky-panky, while waiting to move on to a higher plane? Well, because Daniel is afraid.

That's the biggest challenge facing Daniel on his personal judgement day. The sins that prosecutor Lee Grant wants to confront Daniel with all have to do with his fears to fully live life. Yet the scenes that she, and Brooks as screenwriter and director, choose to show us contain little humor and even less insight into the human soul. Most have to do with money. For example, in his twenties Daniel refused to invest in Casio right before their stock took off. Later, he meekly accepted the first salary offer (an amount higher than the yearly income of a great many families of four in this country) for a new job. He'd wanted twenty thousand more.

These are a man's greatest transgressions? We're talking about a man, bitter from a failed marriage, who makes jokes about his mother at parties, and who spends his birthday driving around in his new gas-guzzler by his lonesome! It's one thing for an American yuppie to be obsessed with money, but you'd think a quasi-heavenly tribunal might have loftier concerns.

There were so many tragi-comic possibilities in the life of Brooks's successful schlump of a hero. Fear of intimacy is the biggie Brooks all but ignores in his examination of Daniel's earthly existence. I would have thought that the sleaziness of Daniel's professional life — he *was* in advertising, after all — was worth a few shots, too. Too bad Albert's aim was so badly off. One can only conclude that Mr. Brooks the filmmaker is just as afraid of life's major mysteries as his autobiographical hero appears to be.

The oily jolliness of Rip Torn's performance as Daniel's defender is

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the film's only triumph. Picture Oral Robers as a midtown attorney and you've got the character. Streep does her best, but she's badly miscast in the role of Julia. Julia is meant to be a madcap with a halo. Carole Lombard would have been perfect. Maybe Meg Ryan could have handled the role today. Streep is a little too chilly. But maybe she *does* suit this picture, somehow, since *Defending Your Life* is liable to leave most audiences cold.

Luckily, there's nothing cold about Ellen Barkin's performance in *Switch*. She is the one — the only — reason to see the latest lame gender-bender comedy from Blake Edwards. Barkin plays another dead advertising executive. (Query: Did someone take a poll to determine the white collar professional Americans would most like to see drop dead?)

When *Switch* opens, the lead character is a man named Steve Brooks, played by Perry King. Evidently, lover-boy Steve is a man who's never met a woman who didn't hate him. What more appropriate fate for a lady-killer than to be killed by a few ladies? When Steve wakes up in Purgatory, after being murdered by a trio of ex-lovers, God (a he/she voice emanating from a tunnel of blue light) offers Steve a chance to redeem himself. Go back to life and find one woman who likes him. The devil, who is evidently English — now you know what happened to the British Empire — wants to make Steve's round of Truth or Consequences a little more challenging. So *he* becomes a *she*: a beautiful blonde called Amanda.

Switch's structural problems are too numerous to mention, but the greatest of them is the basic fallacy of Steve's purgatorial quest. As a woman, Amanda would have no problem finding a woman who'd like her. (Women do tend to like their own kind, after all.) Yet Barkin keeps trying to find a woman who liked Steve, the womanizing male. But if that's the way Edwards wanted to play it, then he should have concocted a different ending. The "woman" who saves Steve's bacon from hitting the male chauvinist hell-fire doesn't like him, she likes Amanda.

In the end, Barkin's Amanda embraces the self-sacrificial aspects of femininity in a manner that should garner writer-director Edwards a Man of the Year award from Operation Rescue. But for much of the movie, Barkin's biggest womanly concerns seem to focus on her wardrobe. Transformed into a female, Steve fashions himself into his own fantasy, donning spike-heeled pumps and thigh-constrict-

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ing mini-skirts.

Barkin's wobbly walk may be funny the first time you see it, but after five or six scenes of her flopping around, you wonder why the poor dunce doesn't just buy a pair of stylish flats. And if s/he resents being treated like a piece of meat by construction workers, you wonder why s/he doesn't tone down the Frederick's of Hollywood fashion statement she's making.

That would make too much sense, of course. And Edwards doesn't want his movie to seem too rational. That might make us wonder why he didn't do something meaningful with the juicier aspects of the gender issues that form the basis of his plot. His cowardice is especially glaring in the sex scene between Amanda and a lesbian magnate (played by Lorraine Bracco) and another with Steve's best buddy (played by Jimmy Smits).

Like *Defending Your Life*, *Switch* doesn't have the courage of its own high concept. I have a friend who swears that no filmmaker would ever introduce Providence into a plot if they knew how to move it along with anything approaching common sense or basic humanity. I almost agree with him. But at least one of the current crop of other-worldly romantic comedies proved that it is possible to create a ghostly plot driven by believable, likeable characters.

Anthony Minghella's BBC film, *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is enough to renew the faith of even the most jaundiced reviewer. Like *Ghost*, Minghella's screenplay is about a woman whose lover dies, and who is helped when she is haunted by him. But as romanic as *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is (and the title aptly captures the spirit of the film), there is both an earthiness and honesty to it that puts Bruce Joel Rubin's mega-hit screenplay to shame.

It helps to have Alan Rickman, a brilliant actor, playing a ghostly lover. Usually typecast in villainy (the head terrorist in *Die Hard*, the Sheriff of Nottingham in Costner's *Robin Hood*), Rickman's role as the tender phantom, Jamie, proves that he deserves to be a romantic leading man. Juliet Stevenson is equally strong as Jamie's living lover, Nina. Her grief isn't as photogenic as Demi Moore's, but it packs twice the wallop.

Truly, Madly, Deeply is the kind of haunting experience all moviegoers hope for when they go see a ghost story. It's also hilarious. Minghella, unlike Brooks or Edwards, freely explores the complexities of the situation he creates. Much as you love someone, maybe it *wouldn't* be a blessing to have their after-life take place in your *life*, after all.

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The success of *Ghost* probably means that the trend towards romantic comedies about dead guys has only just begun. So far, the thematic material has been sorely under-utilized. Like Daniel Miller, most filmmakers are too cowardly. Although the spirit world might be limitless, the same cannot be said about the gents who make movies about it. At best, *Ghost*-like films provide a little shallow comfort as we face our terror of the great unknown. They don't provoke thought, they merely soothe us with a refrain straight out of a Bob Dylan ditty: "Don't think twice, it's all right."

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Ah, Camelot. The Arthurian stories are old, tried and familiar. Unless they're done by the hands of a master. Mike Resnick takes the old sorcerer Merlin, and makes him new again. Mike has a talent for this sort of thing. He revived Theodore Roosevelt in his novella Bully!, now out with his novella Bwana *in mass market paperback. This fall, expect a few novels from Ace, a short story collection, and an anthology of alternate history stories.*

Winter Solstice

By Mike Resnick

IT IS NOT easy to live backward in time, even when you are Merlin the Magnificent. You would think it would be otherwise, that you would remember all the wonders of the future, but those memories grow dim and fade more quickly than you might suppose. I know that Galahad will win his duel tomorrow, but already the name of his son has left me. In fact, does he even have a son? Will he live long enough to pass on his noble blood? I think perhaps he may — I think that I have held his grandchild upon my knee — but I am not sure. It is all slipping away from me.

Once I knew all the secrets of the universe. With no more than a thought, I could bring Time to a stop, reverse it in its course, twist it around my finger like a piece of string. By force of will alone, I could pass among the stars and the galaxies. I could create life out of nothingness, and turn living, breathing worlds into dust.

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Time passed — though not the way it passes for you — and I could no longer do these things. But I could isolate a DNA molecule and perform microsurgery on it, and I could produce the equations that allowed us to traverse the wormholes in space, and I could plot the orbit of an electron.

Still more time slipped away, and although these gifts deserted me, I could create penicillin out of bread mold, and comprehend both the general and special theories of relativity, and I could fly between the continents.

But all that has gone, and I remember it as one remembers a dream, on those occasions I can remember it at all. There was — there someday will be, there may come to you — a disease of the aged, in which you lose portions of your mind, pieces of your past, thoughts you've thought and feelings you've felt, until all that's left is the primal *id*, screaming silently for warmth and nourishment. You see parts of yourself vanishing, you try to pull them back from oblivion, you fail, and all the while you realize what is happening to you, until even that perception, that realization, is lost. I will weep for you in another millennium, but now your lost faces fade from my memory, your desperation recedes from the stage of my mind, and soon I will remember nothing of you. Everything is drifting away on the wind, eluding my frantic efforts to clutch it and bring it back to me.

I am writing this down so that someday someone — possibly even *you*— will read it and will know that I was a good and moral man, that I did my best under circumstances that a more compassionate God might not have forced upon me, that even as events and places slipped away from me, I did not shirk my duties; I served my people as best I could.

They come to me, my people, and they say, It hurts, Merlin. They say, Cast a spell and make the pain go away. They say, My baby burns with fever, and my milk has dried up. Do something, Merlin, they say; you are the greatest wizard in the kingdom, the greatest wizard who has ever lived. Surely you can do something.

Even Arthur seeks me out. The war goes badly, he confides to me. The heathen fight against baptism; the knights have fallen to battling amongst themselves; he distrusts his queen. He reminds me that it was I who taught him the secret of Excalibur (but that was many years ago, and of course I know nothing of it yet). I look at him thoughtfully, and though I know an Arthur who is bent with age and beaten down by the caprices of Fate, an Arthur who has lost his Guinevere and his Round Table and all his dreams of Camelot, I can summon no compassion, no sympathy for this young man who is

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speaking to me. He is a stranger, as he will be yesterday, as he will be last week.

An old woman comes to see me in the early afternoon. Her arm is torn and miscolored; the stench of it makes my eyes water; the flies are thick around her.

I cannot stand the pain any longer, Merlin, she weeps. It is like childbirth, but does not go away. You are my only hope, Merlin. Cast your mystic spell, charge me what you will, but make the pain cease.

I look at her arm, where the badger has ripped it with his claws, and I want to turn my head away and retch. I finally force myself to examine it. I have a sense that I need something — I am not sure what — something to attach to the front of my face; or, if not my whole face, then at least across my nose and mouth, but I cannot recall what it is.

The arm is swollen to almost twice its normal size, and although the wound is halfway between her elbow and her shoulder, she shrieks in agony when I gently manipulate her fingers. I want to give her something for her pain. Vague visions come to mind, images of something long and slender and needle-like flash briefly before my eyes. There must be something I can do, I think, something I can give her, some miracle that I employed when I was younger and the world was older, but I can no longer remember what it is.

I must do more than mask her pain; this much I still know, for infection has set in. The smell becomes stronger as I probe, and she screams. *Gang,* I think suddenly: the word for her condition begins with *gang* — but there is another syllable, and I cannot recall it; and even if I could recall it, I can no longer cure it.

But she must have some surcease from her agony. She believes in my powers, and she is suffering, and my heart goes out to her. I mumble a chant, half-whispering and half-singing. She thinks I am calling up my ethereal servants from the Netherworld, that I am bringing my magic to bear on the problem; and because she needs to believe in something, in *anything,* because she is suffering such agony, I do not tell her that what I am really saying is, God, just this one time, let me remember. Once, years, eons from now, I could have cured her; give me back the knowledge just for an hour, even for a minute. I did not ask to live backward in Time, but it is my curse, and I have willingly borne it — but don't let this poor old woman die because of it. Let me cure her, and then You can ransack my mind and take back my memories.

But God does not answer, and the woman keeps screaming, and finally I gently plaster mud on the wound to keep the flies away. There should be

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medicine, too; it comes in bottles (*bottles*? Is that the right word?) — but I don't know how to make it, I don't even remember its color or shape or texture, and I give the woman a root, and mutter a spell over it, and tell her to sleep with it between her breasts and to believe in its healing powers, and soon the pain will subside.

She believes me — there is no earthly reason why she should, but I can see in her eyes that she does — and then she kisses my hands and presses the root to her bosom and wanders off, and somehow, for some reason, she *does* seem to be in less discomfort, though the stench of the wound lingers long after she has gone.

Then it is Lancelot's turn. Next week or next month, he will slay the Black Knight, but first I must bless his sword. He talks of things we said to each other yesterday, things of which I have no recollection, and I think of things we will say to each other tomorrow.

I stare into his dark brown eyes, for I alone know his secret, and I wonder if I should tell Arthur. I know they will fight a war over it, but I do not remember if I am the catalyst or if Guinevere herself confesses her infidelities, and I can no longer recall the outcome. I concentrate and try to see the future, but all I see is a city of towering steel-and-glass structures, and I cannot see Arthur or Lancelot anywhere, and then the image vanishes, and I still do not know whether I am to go to Arthur with my secret knowledge or keep my silence.

I realize that it has all happened, that the Round Table and the knights and even Arthur will soon be dust no matter what I say or do, but they are living forward in Time, and this is of momentous import to them, even though I have watched it all pass and vanish before my eyes.

Lancelot is speaking now, wondering about the strength of his faith, the purity of his virtue, filled with self-doubt. He is not afraid to die at the hands of the Black Knight, but he is afraid to face his God if the reason for his death lies within himself. I continue to stare at him, this man who daily feels the bond of our friendship growing stronger while I daily find that I know him less and less, and finally I lay a hand on his shoulder and assure him that he will be victorious, that I have had a vision of the Black Knight lying dead upon the field of battle as Lancelot raises his bloody sword in victorious triumph.

Are you sure, Merlin? he asks doubtfully.

I tell him that I am sure. I could tell him more, tell him that I have seen the future, that I am losing it as quickly as I am learning the past, but he has

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problems of his own — and so, I realize, have I, for as I know less and less, I must pave the way for that youthful Merlin who will remember nothing at all. It is *he* that I must consider — I speak of him in the third person, for I know nothing of him, and he can barely remember me, nor will he know Arthur or Lancelot or even the dark and twisted Modred — for as each of my days passes and Time continues to unwind, he will be less able to cope, less able to define even the problems he will face, let alone the solutions. I must give him a weapon with which to defend himself, a weapon that he can use and manipulate no matter how little he remembers of me, and the weapon I choose is superstition. Where once I worked miracles that were codified in books and natural law, now, as their secrets vanish one by one, I must replace them with miracles that bedazzle the eye and terrify the heart, for only by securing the past can I guarantee the future, and I have already lived the future. I hope I was a good man, I would like to think I was, but I do not know. I examine my mind, I try to probe for weaknesses as I probe my patients' bodies, searching for sources of infection, but I am only the sum of my experience, and my experience has vanished, and I will have to settle for hoping that I disgraced neither myself nor my God.

After Lancelot leaves, I get to my feet and walk around the castle, my mind filled with strange images, fleeting pictures that seem to make sense until I concentrate on them, and then I find them incomprehensible. There are enormous armies clashing, armies larger than the entire populace of Arthur's kingdom, and I know that I have seen them, I have actually stood on the battlefield, perhaps I even fought for one side or the other, but I do not recognize the colors they are wearing, and they use weaponry that seems like magic, *true* magic, to me.

I remember huge spacefaring ships, ships that sail the starways with neither canvas nor masts, and for a moment I think that this must surely be a dream, and then I seem to find myself standing at a small window, gazing out at the stars as we rush by them, and I see the rocky surfaces and swirling colors of distant worlds, and then I am back in the castle, and I feel a tremendous sense of poignancy and loss, as if I know that even the dream will never visit me again.

I decide to concentrate, to force myself to remember, but no images come to me, and I begin to feel like a foolish old man. Why am I doing this? I wonder. It was a dream and not a memory, for everyone knows that the stars are nothing but lights that God uses to illuminate the night sky, and they are

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I have a feeling that as I grow younger, I will commit more than my share of indiscretions.

tacked onto a cloak of black velvet, and the moment I realize this, I can no longer even recall what the starfaring ships looked like, and I know that soon I will not even remember that I once dreamed of them.

I continue to wander the castle, touching familiar objects to reassure myself: this pillar was here yesterday; it will be here tomorrow; it is eternal; it will be here forever. I find comfort in the constancy of physical things, things that are not as ephemeral as my memories, things that cannot be ripped from the earth as easily as my past has been ripped from me. I stop before the church and read a small plaque. It is written in French, and it says that *This Church was* something *by Arthur, King of the Britons.* The fourth word makes no sense to me, and this distresses me, because I have always been able to read the plaque before, and then I remember that tomorrow morning I will ask Sir Ector whether the word means *built* or *constructed,* and he will reply that it means *dedicated,* and I will know that for the rest of my life.

But now I feel a sense of panic, because I am not only losing images and memories, I am actually losing words, and I wonder if the day will come when people will speak to me, and I will understand nothing of what they are saying, and will merely stare at them in mute confusion, my eyes as large and gentle and devoid of intelligence as a cow's. I know that all I have lost so far is a single French word, but it distresses me, because in the future I will speak French fluently, as well as German, and Italian, and . . .and I know there is another language, I will be able to speak it and read it and write it, but suddenly it eludes me, and I realize that another ability, another memory, yet another integral piece of myself, has fallen into the abyss, never to be retrieved.

I turn away from the plaque, and I go back to my quarters, looking neither right nor left for fear of seeing some building, some artifact that has no place in my memory, something that reeks of permanence and yet is unknown to me, and I find a scullery maid waiting for me. She is young and very pretty, and I will know her name tomorrow, will roll it around on my mouth and marvel at the melody it makes even coming forth from my old lips, but I look at her, and the fact dawns upon me that I cannot recall who

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she is. I hope I have not slept with her — I have a feeling that as I grow younger, I will commit more than my share of indiscretions — only because I do not wish to hurt her feelings, and there is no logical way to explain to her that I cannot remember her, that the ecstacies of last night and last week and last year are still unknown to me.

But she is not here as a lover; she has come as a supplicant — she has a child, a son, who is standing in the shadows behind my door, and now she summons him forth, and he hobbles over to me. I look down at him, and I see that he is a clubfoot: his ankle is misshapen, his foot is turned inward, and he is very obviously ashamed of his deformity.

Can you help him? asks the scullerymaid; can you make him run like other little boys. I will give you everything I have, anything you ask, if you can make him like the other children.

I look at the boy, and then at his mother, and then once more at the boy. He is so very young, he has seen nothing of the world, and I wish that I could do something to help him, but I no longer know what to do. There was a time when I knew; there will come a time when no child must limp through his life in pain and humiliation — I know this is so; I know that someday I will be able to cure far worse maladies than a clubfoot; at least I think I know this — but all that I know for sure is that the boy was born a cripple and will live a cripple and will die a cripple, and there is nothing I can do about it.

You are crying, Merlin, says the scullery maid. Does the sight of my child so offend you?

No, I say, it does not offend me.

Then why do you cry, she asks.

I cry because there is nothing else I can do but cry, I reply. I cry for the life your son will never know, and for the life that I have forgotten.

I do not understand, she says.

Nor do I, I answer.

Does this mean you will not help my son? she asks.

I do not know what it means. I see her face growing older and thinner and more bitter, so I know that she will visit me again and again, but I cannot see her son at all, and I do not know if I will help him, or if I do, exactly *how* I will help him. I close my eyes and concentrate, and try to remember the future. *Is* there a cure? Do men still limp on the moon? Do old men still weep because they cannot help? I try, but it has slipped away

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again.

I must think about this problem, I say at last. Come back tomorrow, and perhaps I will have a solution.

You mean a spell? she asks eagerly.

Yes, a spell, I say.

She calls the child to her, and together they leave, and I realize that she will come back alone tonight, for I am sure, at least I am almost sure, that I will know her name tomorrow. It will be Marian, or Miranda, something beginning with an *M*, or possibly Elizabeth. But I think, I am really almost certain, that she will return, for her face is more real to me now than it was when she stood before me. Or is it that she has not stood before me yet? It gets more and more difficult to separate the events from the memories, and the memories from the dreams.

I concentrate on her face, this Marian or Miranda, and it is another face I see, a lovely face with pale blue eyes and high cheekbones, a strong jaw and long auburn hair. It meant something to me once, this face; I feel a sense of warmth and caring and loss when I see it, but I don't know why. I have an instinctive feeling that this face meant, will mean, more to me than any other, that it will bring me both happiness and sorrow beyond any that I have ever known. There is a name that goes with it; it is not Marion or Miriam (or is it?); I grasp futilely for it, and the more frantically I grasp, the more rapidly it recedes.

Did I love her, the owner of this face? Will we bring joy and comfort to one another? Will we produce sturdy, healthy children to comfort us in our old age? I don't know, because my old age has been spent, and hers is yet to come, and I have forgotten what she does not yet know.

I concentrate on the image of her face. How will we meet? What draws me to you? There must be a hundred little mannerisms, foibles as often as virtues, that will endear you to me. Why can I not remember a single one of them? How will you live, and how will you die? Will I be there to comfort you, and once you're lost, who will be there to comfort me? Is it better that I can no longer recall the answers to these questions?

I feel if I concentrate hard enough, things will come back to me. No face was ever so important to me, not even Arthur's, and so I block out all other thoughts and close my eyes and conjure up her face (yes, *conjure*; I am Merlin, am I not?) — but now I am not so certain that it *is* her face. Was the jaw thus or so? Were her eyes really that pale, her hair that auburn? I

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am filled with doubt, and I imagine her with eyes that were a deeper blue; hair that was lighter and shorter, a more delicate nose; and I realize that I have never seen this face before, that I was deluded by my self-doubts, that my memory has not failed me completely, and I attempt to paint her portrait on the canvas of my mind once again, but I cannot — the proportions are wrong; the colors are askew — and even so, I cling to this approximation, for once I have lost it, I have lost her forever. I concentrate on the eyes, making them larger, bluer, paler, and finally I am pleased with them, but now they are in a face that I no longer know, her true face as elusive now as her name and her life.

I sit back on my chair and I sigh. I do not know how long I have been sitting here, trying to remember a face — a woman's face, I think, but I am no longer sure — when I hear a cough, and I look up, and Arthur is standing before me.

We must talk, my old friend and mentor, he says, drawing up his own chair and seating himself on it.

Must we? I ask.

He nods his head firmly. The Round Table is coming apart, he says, his voice concerned. The kingdom is in disarray.

You must assert yourself and put it in order, I say, wondering what he is talking about.

It's not that easy, he says.

It never is, I say.

I need Lancelot, says Arthur. He is the best of them, and after you, he is my closest friend and adviser. He thinks I don't know what he is doing, but I know, though I pretend not to.

What do you propose to do about it? I ask.

He turns to me, his eyes tortured. I don't know, he says. I love them both, I don't want to bring harm to them, but the important thing is not me or Lancelot or the queen, but the Round Table. I built it to last for all eternity, and it must survive.

Nothing lasts for eternity, I say.

Ideals do, he replies with conviction. There is Good and there is Evil, and those who believe in the Good must stand up and be counted.

Isn't that what you have done? I ask.

Yes, says Arthur, but until now the choice was an easy one. Now I do not know which road to take. If I stop feigning ignorance, then I must kill Lancelot and burn the queen at the stake, and this will surely destroy the

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Round Table. He pauses and looks at me. Tell me the truth, Merlin, he says. Would Lancelot be a better king than I? I must know, for if it will save the Round Table, I will step aside, and he can have it all — the throne, the queen, Camelot. But I must be sure.

Who can say what the future holds? I reply.

You can, he says. At least, when I was a young man, you told me that you could.

Did I? I ask curiously. I must have been mistaken. The future is as unknowable as the past.

But everyone knows the past, he says. It is the future that men fear.

Men fear the unknown, wherever it may lie, I say.

I think that only cowards fear the unknown, says Arthur. When I was a young man and I was building the Table, I could not wait for the future to arrive. I used to awaken an hour before sunrise and lie there in my bed, trembling with excitement, eager to see what new triumphs each day would bring me. Suddenly he sighs and seems to age before my eyes. But I am not that man anymore, he continues after a thoughtful silence, and now I fear the future. I fear for Guinevere, and for Lancelot, and for the Round Table.

That is not what you fear, I say.

What do you mean? he asks.

You fear what all men fear, I say.

I do not understand you, says Arthur.

Yes, you do, I reply. And now you fear even to admit to your fears.

He takes a deep breath and stares unblinking into my eyes, for he is truly a brave and honorable man. All right, he says at last. I fear for *me*.

That is only natural, I say.

He shakes his head. It does not *feel* natural, Merlin, he says.

Oh, I say.

I have failed, Merlin, he continues. Everything is dissolving around me — the Round Table and the reasons for it. I have lived the best life I could, but evidently I did not live it well enough. Now all that is left to me is my death — he pauses uncomfortably — and I fear that I will die no better than I have lived.

My heart goes out to him, this young man that I do not know but will know someday, and I lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

I am a king, he continues, and if a king does nothing else, he must die

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well and nobly.

You will die well, my lord, I say.

Will I? he asks uncertainly. Will I die in battle, fighting for what I believe when all others have left my side — or will I die a feeble old man, drooling, incontinent, no longer even aware of my surroundings?

I decided to try once more to look into the future, to put his mind at ease. I close my eyes and I peer ahead, and I see not a mindless, babbling old man, but a mindless, mewling baby, and that baby is myself.

Arthur tries to look ahead to the future he fears, and I, traveling in the opposite direction, look ahead to the future *I* fear, and I realize that there is no difference, that this is the humiliating state in which man both enters and leaves the world, and that he had better learn to cherish the time in between, for it is all that he has.

I tell Arthur again that he shall die the death he wants, and finally he leaves, and I am alone with my thoughts. I hope I can face my fate with the same courage that Arthur will face his, but I doubt that I can, for Arthur can only guess at his, while I can see mine with frightening clarity. I try to remember how Arthur's life actually does end, but it is gone, dissipated in the mists of Time, and I realize that there are very few pieces of myself left to lose before I become that crying, mindless baby, a creature of nothing but appetites and fears. It is not the end that disturbs me, but the knowledge of the end, the terrible awareness of it happening to me while I watch helpless, almost an observer at the disintegration of whatever it is that has made me Merlin.

A young man walks by my door and waves to me. I cannot recall ever seeing him before.

Sir Pellinore stops to thank me. For what? I don't remember.

It is almost dark. I am expecting someone. I think it is a woman; I can almost picture her face. I think I should tidy up the bedroom before she arrives, and I suddenly realize that I don't remember where the bedroom is. I must write this down while I still possess the gift of literacy.

Everything is slipping away, drifting on the wind.

Please, somebody, help me.

I'm frightened.

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Sometimes the best fiction is the most difficult to categorize. Lois Tilton's "A Just and Lasting Peace" feels like fantasy. But perhaps it belongs to that end of the genre which is more properly called science fiction. Or perhaps it defies labels altogether. In any case, Lois last appeared in our July issue with her fantasy, "A Soldier's Bride." Her short fiction has also appeared in Aboriginal SF, Weird Tales, Women of Darkness, *and* Sword and Sorceress. *Her novel,* Vampire Winter, *will appear this fall.*

A Just and Lasting Peace

By Lois Tilton

I REMEMBER HOW MY BARE feet used to drag in the dust whenever I came up the road to the Ross place, walking slower and slower as I got near to the turn in the road. Let him not be there, I'd be thinking. Just this once. But then the front porch would come into sight, and there he'd be — Nathan's grandpa, Captain Ross — sitting out in his old cane-bottom chair just like always, black hickory stick across his knees, as ancient as Moses and as close to the Lord.

I'd come up those steps onto the porch just like I was about to meet the Final Judgment. And in fact, whenever I thought of the Lord, the image in my mind was the face of Captain Joseph Buckley Ross, right down to the flowing white beard and lowering eyebrows. And I figured the punishments of Hell couldn't be any worse either than the smart of that black hickory stick coming down across the backs of my legs. He kept it by him to beat the daylights out of any Yankee who dared come on his land — or so Nathan said. My ma said it was on account of his arthritis.

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So I flinched at the crack of wood when he banged it down on the warped planks of the porch. "Stand up straight, boy! Put your shoulders back! Can't tolerate a boy who slouches.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded when I'd straightened up. "Don't just stand there with your mouth open! What's that there you've got?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir." The empty tin pail I was holding knocked against my shins. "My ma sent me to ask, could she please borrow a pail of molasses?"

He sat back in his chair and kind of sighed. "You just go back to the kitchen and ask Miss Rachel."

"Yes, sir. Thank you," I said quickly, but before I could escape, the hickory stick lowered to block my way.

"You know your grandpa served under me in the War, boy. Never a better soldier than Sergeant James Dunbar. A damn shame to see his namesake standing here shuffling and slouching like a mollycoddle. You hear me, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got to stand up straight, look the damn Yankees right in the eye. Like your grandpa would, if he were still alive."

"Yes, sir."

When we were both barely out of shirttails, Nathan used to boast all the time about how he was named for General Forrest. *Nathan Bedford Forrest Ross*, he'd say, drawing out all the names. I was no more than five or six, and a sergeant seemed awfully small to me next to a general, so I'd bragged myself how I'd been named for the James brothers, the ones who shot Old Abe. Only, the next time I came up to the house, Captain Ross laid into me with his stick for denying my own grandpa's name. Trouble was, I never knew him, nor my pa, neither, not really. Nathan was always as close to a brother as I ever had.

"Oh, go on, then," the captain said. "Back to the kitchen." The stick moved aside to let me pass, and I ran down the stairs, the tin pail racketing.

Miss Rachel, Nathan's ma, was alone in the kitchen around the back of the house, putting up butter beans. It sure looked like hot, steamy work, standing over those boiling kettles. Her dress had a dark, damp splotch all the way down the back. I said, "Miss Rachel," and when she turned around, I could see how her hair, going gray, was plastered against her forehead with sweat. She straightened with a hand in the small of her back, brushed

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her hair back, then wiped her hands on her threadbare, stained apron.

"Afternoon, Jamie," she said, her eyes resting on the pail. "Your ma send you?"

"Yes, ma'am. She said to ask, could you please spare a pail of molasses?" Nervously glancing behind me to make sure no one was spying, I reached into my overall pocket and took out a single tattered greenback, folded small so you couldn't see President Charles Sumner's Yankee face on the bill. Looking as guilty as me, she took the money, tucked it away into an inside pocket of her apron.

"Come on," she said then. "I'll get your ma her molasses."

I followed with the pail, trying not to look back behind me. Old Captain Ross hated the sight of the occupation currency, swore he wouldn't have a greenback on his place. Which was just one more burden on Miss Rachel and Mr. Jeff, the ones who had to do all the work around the place. Like my ma told me, "You can't eat pride, Jamie, no matter what men like Captain Ross will tell you. All you can do is choke on it."

So I stood uncomfortably shifting from one foot to the other till Miss Rachel handed back my pail, heavy now. "Careful," she warned me. "That lid doesn't fit quite tight." There was something defiant in her face that reminded me of my own ma, and so I just ducked my head and said, "Yes, ma'am," and lit out of there careful not to spill the molasses. I went around the back, to keep out of the captain's eye, and find Nathan if I could.

Out by the barn, I ran into Jefferson Ross bringing the mule in from the field. The mule's head was hanging low, and I wondered how much longer it would hold out. "Afternoon, Mr. Jeff," I called out to him, but, like always, he never said a word. Dawn to dusk he worked that farm, Mr. Jeff did, but you might not hear a word out of him from one Sunday to the next, no more than Captain Ross would ever say to him, on account of he thought his son was a coward. They were a peculiar bunch, the Rosses, that was for sure, and it made me glad sometimes that it was just Ma and me at home.

I found Nathan like I thought I would, out in the field picking beans. He was eighteen months older than me, Nathan was, though he liked to raise it to two years, and he was starting to stretch out to the height of a grown man, all arms and legs and bones. He straightened up when I called out to him, pulled off his hat to wipe the sweat out of his face. He was a redhead, with freckles the size of dimes all over his face and arms.

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"Sure is hot!"

"Sure is," I agreed, and when his eyes went to the pail, I explained, "Came to borrow some 'lasses."

He nodded, letting me know he knew about the greenbacks, but that he'd keep it to himself, since I was really only a go-between, anyway. "Listen, Jamie —" I could see he was all excited about something and bursting to tell it to somebody. The handle of the molasses pail was cutting into my fingers, and I set it down, right next to his half-full sack of beans. "If I show you something, you got to swear to keep it a secret."

"What's the matter, don't you trust me?"

"All right, then, come on." He glanced around to make sure nobody was watching us, and we lit out, going through the cornfield, the ears all swelling in the summer heat, and down into the belt of woods by the creek. It was cool in the woods, and I though we might go down to the creek and splash around some in the water, but instead, Nathan led me upstream a ways, to a place where the bank had been worn away to expose a shelf of limestone.

"We're off our property here," he said, with the low bitterness in his voice there to remind me, in case I could forget that all this land had once belonged to Captain Ross, hundreds of acres on both sides of the creek and upstream for more than a mile. But these days, what it meant was that whatever Nathan had hidden here, the Yankees couldn't prove who it belonged to.

Carefully, he knelt down and lifted up a slab of the stone, revealing a narrow opening as deep as a man's arm and maybe twice as long. There was a bundle inside, done up in oilcloth, and Nathan pulled it out, started to undo the wrappings. There was only one thing it could be, that size and shape, and it made my heart hammer, knowing I was so close to it.

"Look at her!" Nathan pulled aside the last wrapping.

I caught my breath. "A Sharps repeater!"

"Grandpa gave her to me last week on my birthday. He says next spring after the planting, I can go down to Texas." He stood there holding the rifle, glowing with pride, and I felt, like I was expected to feel, no more than a little kid next to him. He was all of thirteen and with a gun of his own, just about nearly a man and joined up with the Raiders, or at least he would be come next spring. He sighted down the barrel. "My brother Jeb says there's a place for me in his company. My pa's old company," he added

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in a lower tone of voice.

I nodded solemnly. This was the bond between us, that both of our fathers had been killed fighting for the Cause — mine before I was even born, his just six years ago, hanged after the raid on Shreveport. It was worse for Nathan, I think, because he could remember his pa, and his Uncle Andy, too, who was in the Yankee prison at Lexington. Of all Captain Ross's sons, only Jeff had stayed home to work the farm, and on account of that, the captain hadn't spoken a civil word to him since the day Nathan's pa was hanged. "Though he'll eat the food on his table," my ma had said sharply once, defending Mr. Jeff.

The trouble with Ma was, she made too much sense. But next to an almost-new Sharps repeating carbine, her words might as well have been in some foreign tongue. "Can I hold it?" I dared to ask Nathan. "Is it loaded?"

He put it into my hands, and I held it briefly, tasting the bittersweet pangs of jealousy.

"Come on," Nathan said suddenly, retaking possession, and I followed him up the bank, moving Indian style like hunters through the trees and brush. The thrill of danger raced through my veins, knowing it meant prison if the Yankees ever caught us with the gun — that is, if we weren't shot on sight. But I suppose Nathan's father and uncles must have hunted these woods when they were boys, back before the Surrender. My own pa hadn't even been born yet then, not until after my Grandpa James had come back from the Yankee prison camp at Fort Douglas, already half-dead with consumption, so that he died before my pa was one year old.

We came out of the woods into a strip of hayfield, full of heat and sunshine, with grasshoppers whirring and flying up into my face. I knew where we were, and I whispered to Nathan, "Careful," but he just shook his head for me to be quiet and follow him, and we crawled through the hay on our bellies, up to the edge of the cotton field. Down at the other end of the row, there was the figure of a black man with a hoe in his hand, chopping up and down, up and down under the hot sun.

This was land where the Rosses had planted cotton before the War, but the captain wouldn't grow it now — most of the white farmers wouldn't, called it nigger's work, even though they could have gotten a pretty good price, a lot higher than corn, anyway. Yankees had taken the land after the Surrender, parceled it out to the Rosses' slaves, but it had long since been lost to Yankee tax speculators who hired it out on shares to grow cotton.

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Truth to tell, I don't think those sharecroppers were all that much better off than we were, but that didn't mean anything to Nathan. All he could see was the nigger on his grandpa's land.

Ahead of me, he was bringing up the rifle, sighting down the barrel at the man at the end of the row. . . .

Oh God! The metal taste of real fear came into my mouth, and I jerked hard on Nathan's leg, anything to stop him. Shooting a nigger, that was almost as bad as shooting a Yankee. If Nathan pulled that trigger, there'd be bluecoat soldiers everywhere like the locust plague in the Bible — beatings, jailings, and the rest of it. They'd tear the whole neighborhood apart looking for the gun, and the Ross place first of all — it being closest, and the Yankees knowing how many of the Rosses had gone off to ride with the Raiders. Nathan's brothers both had a price on their heads, a bounty on them dead or alive. The least the bluecoats would do was burn down the barn, and most likely the house, too, even if they didn't find anything.

Nathan just couldn't do it. And of course he knew it, too, and he finally lowered the gun and turned back to face me, and if I'd seen his face before, I'd have been even more scared. "It's our land," he whispered, almost like a hiss. "*Our* land!"

My ma told me once it was the worst thing the Yankees had done, taking the land. Worse even than the vote — but then she had to explain to me about voting, how the Yankees pick who's going to be president. But with the land gone, it was like the men had no choice but to keep on fighting, even after the Surrender. And her eyes had got that look in them that I knew she was thinking of my pa.

But Nathan lowered the gun and followed me when I started to crawl away into the woods, and I could see when he caught up that he was looking kind of pale and scared himself. "Best get this put back away," he said. "My ma'll whip the hide off me if I don't get those beans picked."

And then of course I recalled the pail of molasses that I'd left sitting out there in the field, and we hurried to cache the gun again and get back before we could get into even more trouble.

On the way home, I waved to Captain Ross, but he never saw me. He was facing off into the distance beyond the creek, and I knew he was staring at the dead black chimney stacks of the big house on the land he'd owned before the War. That was another story I knew, how he came back

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home after eight years in the prison camp along with my grandpa, and found the Yankees had burned it down to the ground. After that, there was no forgiving for the captain, not ever, so long as he drew breath.

It was about a week or so later when I asked my ma if I could ride into Covington with Nathan the next Saturday, it being the big market day there.

She was at her sewing machine. "You'll do all your chores here around the house before you go."

I nodded, because it was only me and Ma there in the house, and she worked too hard already — ten hours a day at the Yankee cotton mill and sewing half the night besides, mostly fancywork for rich Yankee ladies, to get a few dollars extra.

"All right, then," she said, keeping her eyes on her work. I glanced over at the machine, saw the white stars on blue, the red field. It was prison if she was caught making that flag, and yet never once had she hesitated to do her part, as she called it.

"Ma?" I asked after a few minutes.

"Jamie?"

"Ma, in a year or so, when I'm grown . . . well, do you suppose I'll go off to fight with the Raiders?"

The treadle-driven machine never slowed as she said, "Oh, you'll go, all right. Just like your pa did before you."

Somehow that answer raised more misgivings than it put to rest. "But Ma, what I mean is . . . would that be right?"

This time she did look up. There were frown lines between her eyes. She was shortsighted from all her years of close work, though now that I come to think of it, she'd married my pa when she was sixteen, had me at seventeen, and so she wasn't even thirty years old.

"Leaving you here all alone." I didn't say, *like Pa did.* "Isn't that what you say, that some men have to stay home? Like Mr. Jeff Ross?"

The sound of the treadle slowed. She hesitated, looking down at the flag she was sewing and up at me. "Jefferson Ross," she said finally, "is an exceptional man. Enduring what he does. . . ."

"But Ma, don't folks call Mr. Jeff a yellow coward for not going off to fight?"

"Folks know how to use their tongues more than their brains, too." She gave me a sharp look. "I suppose you've been talking with Nathan, is that it?"

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"Well, yes, I guess so. Nathan's already thirteen."

She sighed. "Listen, Son," she said softly, "I never wanted your pa to go fight, either. Especially once I knew I was — you were on the way. And he promised me he wouldn't. But we aren't always given a choice in these things. That's why I won't ask you for any promises, one way or the other. One day, if you have to go, then you'll know. And I'll understand."

I swallowed. "All right, Ma."

She turned back to her machine. "As long as you're going to Covington, I could use half a dozen number twelve needles. I'll give you the money come Saturday."

"All right, Ma."

"Good, then."

COME SATURDAY, I was over at the Ross place by sunup, in time to help Mr. Jeff load up his last few sacks of corn into the wagon. It was sweet corn, the first of the season, picked just the night before, and he looked to get a good price. There were taxes owing on the farm and supplies needed. I had my ma's greenback folded tight in my overall pocket, there with old Captain Ross out on his chair on the porch, even that early, keeping watch in case any Yankees came down the road.

I climbed up onto the wagon seat next to Nathan, we waved good-bye to Miss Rachel and Nathan's sisters, then Mr. Jeff, without a word, slapped the reins down on the mule's rump, and we were on our way.

It was the middle of the morning before we got to Covington, all the pace the Rosses' broken-winded old mule could manage. I'd only been to the city twice before, and I was staring around at everything: the fancy carriages, all the fine houses, the gaslights in the streets. And the tall brick smokestacks of the cottonseed mill, the big freight wagons with their teams of six, eight horses all harnessed up together. Black men driving them, too, though I knew it was the Yankees who owned the mills, just like at home.

And the Yankees, more Yankees than I'd seen in one place in my whole life — not just the bluecoats, but the other ones with their collars and ties all done up even in the summer. And the women — for the first time in my life, there were women everywhere who weren't wearing black. The thought made me kind of grim, and I sat back down in my seat like Nathan.

What I wanted most to see, more than anything else, was the railroad depot, the big, black-smoking locomotives. That was a secret dream of mine,

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that I might get to drive one of those engines when I grew up. Of course, I knew that not even a nigger could get a job like that, though they could work as firemen sometimes, or brakemen. But a Reb, as a train engineer —never.

When we came up near to the depot, Mr. Jeff pulled up the mule and looked worried. There were squads of bluecoats all over the place, on horse and on foot. They were riot troops, with their steel helmets buckled on, and their faces looked hard. Mr. Jeff was trying to turn the wagon around, but the streets were too crowded. I stood up on the wagon seat to look, and I just caught a glimpse of the depot. There was a locomotive, lying on its side like a dead horse, and the rails all torn up around it. "Look!" I whispered to Nathan, all excited, because this was Raiders' work; I was sure of it. I couldn't wait to get down from the wagon and go get a closer look.

But Mr. Jeff finally got the wagon turned around to take a different way to the market. That was when the trouble started. There was a squad of bluecoats lounging in the streets — not riot troops, but nigger soldiers wearing soft caps — and their sergeant, with his big gray side-whiskers, came up and took hold of the mule's head. "They there, Reb! Where do you think you're going?"

The rest of them laughed and got slowly to their feet. I was scared, and I looked at Mr. Jeff to see what I was supposed to do, but he just sat there on the seat, staring forward, and though I could see a muscle twitch in his jaw, he never said a word as they started to surround the wagon.

"Well, boys," the sergeant said then, "hows about we just check out this here load for contraband, hey?"

It was strange, hearing a nigger talk like a Yankee. Two of them climbed onto the back of the wagon and started sifting through the sacks of corn. They were tossing them this way and that, joking how they were going to find guns and ammunition hidden underneath. "How about we check inside some of these sacks?" one of them called out, and then the knives went to work, slitting the sacks, tossing out the corn.

I was so mad and scared I wanted to cry and kill somebody at the same time. I glanced over at Mr. Jeff, sitting there all stiff, with his hands clenched so tight around the reins, the knuckles had gone white. Nathan, too, though he had that same look on his face that I'd seen a couple weeks before in the cotton field, and I knew what he must be thinking inside.

They were throwing a lot of the corn out onto the street, and, seeing his

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crop getting ruined, Mr. Jeff finally turned around to the sergeant and said, "Look, now —"

But it was like that's what they'd been waiting for. The sergeant pulled out his revolver, grinning real nasty, and he stuck it under Mr. Jeff's chin. "What's the matter? Afraid we'll find your contraband? What is it — guns? Explosives? You going to blow up another train? I know how you Rebs operate. Where'd you bring this load in from, anyway, Texas?"

Which proved he wasn't after anything but to bait us, since anyone could see that mule couldn't have made it across Tennessee, let alone to Texas, without falling dead in its traces. Mr. Jeff could see the same thing, and he clamped his mouth shut and didn't say anything more while they finished slashing all his sacks. Then they stood around laughing some more to see us on our hands and knees picking up the corn from off the street. Mr Jeff's face was all stiff, and I could tell it wasn't the first time something like this had happened to him, and I wondered how he'd stood it all for so many years.

But they finally let us go, and we drove the rest of the way to the market, Nathan cursing infernally all the time that he was going to kill those Yankees, gut the blue-bellied swine, and like that. I didn't have too much to say, I admit. I mean, it was one thing, them searching the wagon for contraband, what with the Raiders blowing up the train and all. But what they'd just done to us had been mainly meanness, and I had to suppose I hated them for that, because what had we done to them?

Anyway, we got to the market, and Nathan and I helped Mr. Jeff unload the corn and sort out what the soldiers hadn't ruined, and stack the damaged sacks back in the wagon so they could be sewn back up again. Then we were free to go while Mr. Jeff went to tend to his business. I really wanted to go back and see that train again, where they'd blown it off the tracks, and so I took off after Nathan down the street. I got to admit, I'd forgot all about my ma's greenback folded into my overalls, and the needles I was supposed to buy for her. Just a block or so from the market, we ran into a couple more boys, who let us know what had been going on in town.

I listened with my ears wide open while they told us all about the train being blown up, and how the Yankees had three men in jail for it, waiting to hang, and the riot — an insurrection, they called it — down at the courthouse yesterday when they'd announced the sentence. The Yankees were afraid that Raiders would be coming into town to try to break the three

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of them out, just what the rest of us hoped they would.

Now, Nathan was just boiling over with hate for the Yankees after what they'd done to the corn sacks, thinking, now that it was all over, what he would've done if he only had his gun with him, or if he was a grown man, how he would've shown those Yankee bastards. I could tell he was ashamed of Mr. Jeff, though at the time, he'd just sat there quiet on the wagon seat like Mr. Jeff had done. Which was all anybody could have done, really.

Then, before I knew it, Nathan and the rest of them were all loading up their pockets with rotten turnips and such from the market and heading on down the street. I followed, wondering whether or not this was such a good idea with the Yankees all hair-trigger edgy the way they were. The other boys led the way through the alleys to near the depot, with the soldiers all over the place, standing guard like they were expecting another attack. The boy in the lead hesitated, but Nathan stepped ahead of him and threw first. He caught one of the bluecoats in the back of the neck, under his helmet. Then the rest of us let off a barrage of rotten vegetables, and oh, the way that Yankee cussed! We were all grinning and slapping each other on the back, and I admit I felt better, getting some of my own back after what the bluecoats had done to us.

I was ready to run, like the rest of them already had. But Nathan had got his blood up, and by bad luck there was a pile of loose cobblestones there in the alley. Before I could blink, he'd picked one of them up and let it fly. It hit the soldier on his steel helmet and dropped him to his knees. Then there was a commotion, with the other bluecoats giving the alarm. One of them fired, and I knew I'd had enough for sure. I grabbed onto Nathan's coat to pull him away, but it was too late. A squad of riot troops came charging the alley.

I turned tail to run, but not Nathan. He stood his ground and let fly with another stone, which hit the officer leading the squad. Then there was a roar of gunfire, just like thunder, and I saw Nathan fall, blood bursting out of him everywhere. For a second I couldn't move, seeing him so still, his blood flowing into puddles in the dirt. Then I ran, blindly, because by then I couldn't remember which way the market was, I was so scared.

By the time I found my way back, the whole square was wrecked, wagons and stalls overturned, produce everywhere trodden underfoot. A whole troop of bluecoats had come through, smashed the place, and arrested everybody they could find, including Mr. Jeff. Folks who saw it told me the soldiers had to drag him away, they beat him so bad. They didn't know if he

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was still alive. I couldn't believe it — Mr. Jeff, resisting?

All I could think of was I had to get back home, back to let the Rosses know what had happened. I'd have to walk, with the wagon wrecked and the mule nowhere in sight, but I knew how the road went, and I figured I could make it back before morning, even on foot. So I set out, down the road we'd come in on just that morning, never knowing what was going to happen. It seemed to me that it was wrong somehow that things should look just the same, that the sun was going to rise the next day just like it didn't matter that Nathan was dead.

I was about a mile or two out of town, when there was this clattery thunder of horses behind me on the road, and a troop of bluecoats came charging by. I just about froze, I was so scared, too scared to run, but they just kept right on going, and so I figured it wasn't me they were after. And by the time I did realize where they were headed, it was too late, and I couldn't have done anything, anyhow.

Even before I came around the turn in the road to the Ross place, the flames were shooting up so high it looked like hellfire against the night sky. By the time I got there, the bluecoats had gone, and Miss Rachel was standing out in the yard with the little girls and old Mrs. Ross, Nathan's grandma. They were all of them crying, and Miss Rachel's dress was torn.

"Where's the captain?" I asked, gasping because I'd run most of the way since I first saw the glow of the flames.

Miss Rachel didn't say anything, but she just looked hard at where the porch had been. Later she told the story to my ma, how all those years that Captain Ross had sat out on that porch, he'd kept a pistol strapped under his coat, the same sidearm he'd carried through the War, and he'd sworn that if any bluecoat Yankee ever came up that road onto his land, he'd shoot the bastard dead. And so he had, the last deed of his life.

When I told Miss Rachel what had happened in Covington, she didn't seem much surprised, like it was bound to have happened sooner or later.

I took them all home to my ma — it was the only thing I could think of to do, no matter that we didn't really have the room to put them up. I had to move my bed out onto the porch. When my ma asked Miss Rachel whether she'd be keeping the land and working it, she said she didn't hardly see how she could, on her own, with no man on the place and the taxes still owing.

Without thinking, I burst out, "No! You can't do that! Mr. Jeff will be

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back; he didn't do anything!"

They just looked at me, and I remembered the dead Yankee officer at the Rosses' place. It would be Jefferson Ross who'd pay for that, since the captain was beyond their reach. "But what about Jeb and Bobby?" I asked —Nathan's brothers. "It's their land, too!"

My ma shook her head. "Jeb and Bobby are outlaws, Jamie. They can't come back to work the land, not with that bounty on them."

"I'll do it, then. I'll come help till Mr. Jeff gets back. You know I'm almost twelve years old!"

But Miss Rachel just gave me a kind of sad smile and said how she appreciated my offer and she'd think about it, and didn't my ma need me here at home? I couldn't help thinking, the next few days when everything was upside down with the funerals and all, that my ma likely could manage fairly well without me around, that I'd probably been more of a care and a trouble to her most of my life. It was the same way everywhere, what with the men all dead or in prison or away with the Raiders, bounties on their heads. It was the only thing the Yankees had left us. Now Nathan gone, and Captain Ross, and Mr. Jeff, too — not dead, but in prison for riot and insurrection and conspiracy. All he ever meant to do was stay home and tend his family's land, but they got him, too, in the end. Only the women left, all in black.

And me. So one day I faced it like I always knew I'd have to — I went down in the woods by the creek, down to the limestone shelf that was off the Ross property, and I lifted up the stone where Nathan had showed me, that one time. There it was, wrapped up the way he left it.

To this day, I've never known whether I could call it my own choice or something else. After a while, it didn't seem like it made much of a difference. I reached into the hiding place and lifted out the gun, and the weight of it was heavier than any burden I'd ever known.

NOTE:

This excerpt from my grandfather's journal was sent me by my sister Ellen, who has been editing his papers. It was included in a letter he had written to his wife while he was waiting to be executed for sedition during the last European War. Thirty years ago, almost to the day. I suppose, considering my current situation, that the selection is particularly appropriate.

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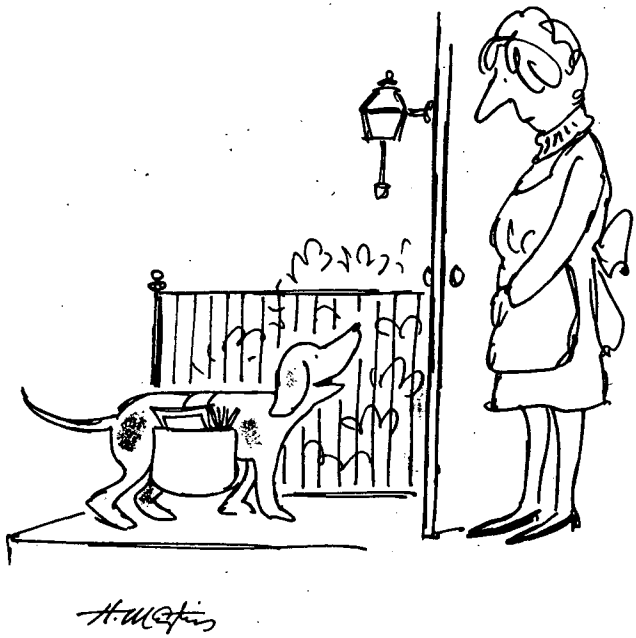
The future of the South was never bleaker than when my grandfather was a young man, before the European conflicts gave us new hope. And yet they never considered abandoning the Cause. The tide is turning now, with out allies behind us, but it could never have come to pass without the courage and determination of those generations. When my own turn comes, I will be proud to be in their company.

I hope someday my own sons and daughters will be able to read this and understand. When it is your time, if our Cause demands that you bear your part of the burden, you may hesitate, but I have confidence that in the end you will know what you have to do.

Oberführer James Ross Dunbar II
58th SS Grenadier Division "Robert E. Lee"
(U.S. Military Prison at Lexington, Ky.,
July 18, 1952)



"Hi. I'm Taffy the Talking Dog. When my career in show biz ended I decided to go back to school and wondered if you'd like to buy a magazine subscription to help pay my tuition."

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Gary Wright began his career almost two decades ago — arriving with a splash. A number of his stories from that period are considered classics, and many have been reprinted in English textbooks across the country. Then Gary disappeared to pursue a life away from fiction. And a few years ago he returned. His first sales in this new half of his career have been to Pulphouse *and* F&SF, *and there are rumors of a novel soon to hit the shelves. We're always pleased to have him in our pages — especially when his stories are as off-beat as this little horror tale.*

Something on the Stairs There Be

By Gary Wright

WHEN HE WAS young, he would lie awake at night in that monstrous old New Hampshire house, a house as big and bleak as a deserted hotel. He would be alone in that distant second-story bedroom like a small scout on some dismal frontier, and he could hear something coming up the dark stairs. Every quiet night, it came. It was impossible to fool him—he knew every squeaky stair, every spot along the hall where a careless tread would make the house talk. Who were these things to think they could sneak up on him? He would lie there and try to not think of that stupid poem Uncle Fred had told him the first time he'd mentioned the night stairs:

Something on the stairs there be,
Something savage wanting me;

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Something dreadful to the sight,
Something coming in the night.

He wished something would come for Uncle Fred.

A quiet *squirk* sounded—that was the third stair—and he would hold his breath and keep his mouth open to listen better. It was coming again.

That slithering hush, hardly heard—it was a hand sliding slowly up the banister, a hand or . . . something like a hand.

Then *tark*, a tiny sound, so small it wouldn't be heard if he wasn't listening carefully—the seventh stair. It would pause there—it always did—it was high enough on the stairs then to turn and gaze back along the hallway to see if his door was closed. And it always was; did they think he was stupid? The one thing that was more terrifying than the stalker was that door standing open, a dark rectangle to the sinister upper hall and the black pit beyond that was the stairs.

Ick—the eighth stair. Why did they think they could sneak up on him? But of course, that was their way. Honest, open people used the light and walked; the others sneaked—that was the way it was. He would have to listen carefully now.

Ur-t—no, that wasn't it; that was the house making a night sound of its own.

Tunk—no, that was far downstairs, Great-Aunt Glenna shutting her bedroom door far, far away beyond the kitchen.

A-t—that was it, the slightest of sounds, like specks of sand falling on the hardwood floor beside the carpet runner. It was the top stair. Now . . . soft along the hallway, it would come.

Ri-ik—halfway, just beyond the first bedroom door—there was a board there that got them every time. Now came the crucial part. There were no more warning boards from there past the second bedroom to his own at the end of the hall. He waited until he could sense its presence just outside the door. As it was reaching for the knob, he hummed a quiet little tune, the kind you might make while lying abed awaiting sleep. He knew they would never come through the door while he was awake; that was a rule of the things that prowled through night houses.

There were times when he would lie for what seemed hours, humming softly, watching the door, outwaiting the thing in the hall. And when the morning sun brought him bolt upright awake, it took a moment for the

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panic to wash away while he stared at the still-closed door and thanked his lucky stars he had outwitted them again.

He asked Aunt Glenna about them, the things that climbed the stairs at night, and he described how he knew they were there. She didn't tell him he was silly, as she usually did when he ventured into questions he thought would probably be silly. She fixed him with her dark, old eyes and told him, "It's probably your sins coming after you."

Now, that was a thought he had never considered; it was too far outside the reality of the situation. Sin was one of those mysterious, knotty things without a shape or weight; and although it might come after you, it wasn't something to make boards creak. These things in the night had a shape; he was sure of that—although he didn't want to think about it too much—and they certainly had weight, or the house wouldn't warn him.

Actually, the whole idea of sin was hard to get a grip on. It was doing something wrong—he knew that—but how could a wrong deed take on form and go a-hunting for the doer? It was too puzzling, and he decided she was just performing one of those bullying grown-up things, and he tucked her suggestion under the heading *Maybe . . . but. . . .*

And, too, the whole idea of giving the thing a definite name took something away. It just wouldn't seem right, waiting in the dark, feeling it just outside the door, and calling out, "I know you! You're Sin. You're the time me and Rick Perry threw a stone at Old Man Stoddard's house. You're the time Wesley Burke brought that medical book he'd found in the attic. You're the time Susie Wheeler and I made some trades. Well . . . we'll prob'ly do it again if we get a chance. So get stuffed, Sin! Go do it to yourself!"

And the thing would slink away, ashamed that it had been found out and named.

But what if—and the sudden thought made his skin crinkle—what if he named the thing, and a soft, low voice answered: "No-o. . . ."

What then?

It was a gamble too dangerous to risk. To speak to it would let it know that he knew it was there, acknowledged, identified . . . and then what? It might say to itself, "Oh well, what the hell," and crash right through the door.

Bad deal!

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The method he had now might be scary and keep him up at night, but at least it worked. No sense in tampering with success, as he'd heard the older folks say. Don't get your fundament fouled, he told himself. That was something he'd heard down at the store. He wasn't sure what it meant, but it sounded right.

When he was a bit older, about nine, Uncle Fred died, and the things came after him with a vengeance. When the October winds moaned and mourned, the house fairly shrieked its warnings. He thought it was because he hadn't liked Uncle Fred very much. Uncle Fred was weird, and he was now probably joining the stairway things as a walking corpse or something. He would listen very carefully, and it seemed sometimes there were two of them. He hummed louder than usual, and, as usual, was successful in keeping them at bay. It was about a year later that he first began seriously questioning himself and the things creeping up the stairs. If they really wanted him, he reasoned, if they *really* wanted to get him, why didn't they just do it? Why screw around with all this skulking in the night? It didn't make any sense. Maybe . . . just maybe they weren't real.

That was a thought.

He lifted a length of dark thread from Aunt Glenna's sewing stuff and strung it across the stairway. He figured about halfway along the stairs would be an unsuspected place, and he tied it loosely to a banister post and tucked the other end into the tiny crack where the baseboard had pulled away from the wall.

One came creeping that night, and he hummed it away, and in the morning the thread was still undisturbed. Some thoughtful consideration, however, told him it really didn't prove anything—the stalkers could see in the dark as easily as he could in the light, and they certainly were alert to all the little childish traps. They were older than the world, and they knew too many things.

So maybe, just maybe they *were* real.

This wasn't something he could make a firm decision about.

AS HE grew older, the things on the stairs came less frequently, as if only checking occasionally to see if he was still vigilant. He was. And then Aunt Glenna died, and in the confusion of people busy doing this and that, his life changed forever. He went to

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live with Cousins Peter and Jessie in a city. It was a much newer house, and it had only one floor, and it didn't talk at night. He would lie awake, listening, and the house made no sounds that were even suggestive. Maybe he had lost the things. They didn't know where he was. Maybe these new houses didn't have stalkers. For one thing, these houses didn't have stairs. Maybe that was the secret.

But no—he came upright in bed one night, yanked back from the edge of sleep, and knew, just *knew*, one was pausing at his door, reaching for the knob. He hummed.

Cousin Peter asked him about that in the morning, and he just shrugged. Humming in the night was not something easily explained. He heard Cousin Peter telling Cousin Jessie, "The kid's strange." And she said, "Peter, what do you expect? He's been all alone since he was four, cooped up in that damned old dinosaur of a house with Aunt Glenna and Uncle Fred. All he had to play with was himself." She laughed. "God, anybody'd be strange."

Strange?

He thought about that a lot. Strange meant peculiar, different, odd. And it fit. He'd always felt different from the other kids. They had parents and homes with younger people in them; he'd had loneliness and old folks around him. The other kids had lots of friends; he'd had . . . things coming up the stairs. Yes . . . it was true—he *was* strange. He was strange, and he liked it. It gave him a feeling of distinction. He began pulling more into himself to make it come truer. Everyone needed to be different, didn't they? When strangers asked him who he was, he'd answer, "I'm strange."

It was a point that few challenged.

By the time he entered high school, he couldn't remember when the stalkers had last listened at his door. And even thinking about them made him feel a little silly. He hated feeling silly. It was like the catch in his chest whenever he saw a door open to a dark place. He would grin it away when that happened.

"Hey, I'm strange," he would tell himself. "Even more, I'm outstanding."

By the time he was a junior in high school, he had most of the answers and was even aware of some of the questions. He wasn't afraid of a damn thing, or maybe he was afraid of everything—it was hard to know whom to believe, the gang of offwalls he ran with or the whispers he heard inside,

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the distant murmurs that told him he was really alone in the world and—yes—definitely strange. But he knew his silly, childhood things in the night were ridiculous. The only problem now in that area was the damn dreams—the ones where he was small again and alone in the room at the end of the hall, and the sounds were coming up the stairs and along the hall, and he couldn't get the door closed. Weird dreams. But the dope helped. When he would wake up in the clammy sweats, shaking, the shit would make it funny for him. And on those nights when he was too alone, he'd do a number just to put the right spin on the world. Peter and Jessie climbed on his case when they found some stuff. Fuckum' very much. There was a long, boring batch of shit that ended with them declaring that he would either get rid of the dope or get out of the house. He slammed to his room and got rid of it by smoking it. Crisis management, he called it. He liked that.

Get out of the house? Be alone out there?

He could do it. Sure. He muttered a song.

"Alone again . . . natural-ly. . . ."

He giggled. It was really good dope, so good that he could lean back with his eyes closed and hear the sounds just as plain as if he were seven and back in that old monster of a house up in boonieland.

Squirk—hell yes, that was . . . what? . . . the third stair? Right! Great!

Then *tark*, the pause, then *ick*, and the soft sliding sound. Fantastic!

He giggled again, remembering that character in—what book was that? One of Brunner's?—who was always saying, *"Christ, what an imagination I've got!"*

"Christ, what an imagiantion I've got!" he snickered. This place was a single story . . . and it didn't have a basement . . . so where were they climbing from.? The ground? Right!

A-t! The smallest sound of all—it was there. Great!

Ri-ik—coming down the hall now. He was having a hard time keeping from laughing aloud.

"Christ, what an imagination I've got," he chuckled again, nodding in agreement.

And now there was the pause. It was listening at the door. He couldn't sense it there like he used to, but the timing was right.

I know you!" he called, bubbling with laughter. "You're Sin! Well, get a shot at this!"

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He turned, dropped his pants, and bent over, then collapsed in laughter onto the floor.

It wasn't funny after a while. He rolled to his feet and pulled his pants up. The door remained closed. And why shouldn't it? he asked himself. So Sin was out there—very big deal.

"Extremely big deal!" he shouted. "I'm so-o-o impressed!"

He stared at the door, trying to imagine . . . what? Sin? The Night of the Walking Boogers? Nazi Chain-saw Motorcycle Hookers from Mars? He tried a smug laugh, but it choked somehow.

The door remained closed. If anything, it was Peter out there snooping on him, sniffing the air like a godamn pisshound.

He realized his breath was coming fast, as if he'd just run too far, and his blood was slamming through him, and he felt prickly all over, and his palms were sweating.

He reached for the doorknob. . . .

"Go ahead, chickenshit," he told himself. "It'll be Peter, and he'll scowl at me, and I'll tell him to go fuck himself, and we'll have another 'family discussion.'"

He turned the doorknob . . . pulled. . . .

The hall was darker than any night . . . and empty. Feeling his way along the banister, he started down the hall.

Ri-ik—halfway—but there wasn't any long hall in this house! He gripped the banister hard. . . . And there had never been a banister, either. It curved sharply back on itself and bent downward. He followed it around and felt with his foot, and found the top stair. He put his weight down.

It was there—*A-t*—the tiny sound.

He started down the stairs that had never been there until tonight . . . or maybe they had been there all along, and he'd never noticed. Maybe there were a lot of things he'd never noticed. He started down and knew, just *knew*, there was something waiting at the bottom. . . . He could feel it.

He froze, fear now exploding through him as he'd never known before. True, substantial fear, not the scary, self-imposed, childhood stuff. This was the manifest thing. This was terror. He couldn't move. His heart hammered in his chest. His lungs locked.

Squirk—that was the third stair from the bottom . . . and that slithering, hushed sound . . . that was a hand sliding up the banister, a hand or . . . something like a hand. . . .

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It was coming for him again. After all these years, it was still coming. He tried to hum. And he couldn't.

He couldn't make a sound as it came.

Ta-rk—the seventh stair. . . . It paused right in front of him. He could smell it.

"Sin . . . ," he breathed.

And a low, soft rumble answered: "No-o-o. . . ."

"Break a leg."

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Paul Di Filippo says that when his mother learned that he sold this story, she reminded him of the grange in his childhood hometown. "When kids were initiated into the grange," he writes, "they were blindfolded, told they would have to 'ride a black goat,' then led to some sort of goat simulacrum. Spooky! Had I remembered to ask her about her grange experiences, who knows what other arcane tidbits I might have picked up?" Perhaps he would have learned of things as strange as those Edward encounters in the following tale.

THE GRANGE

By Paul Di Filippo

"LOOK," SAID LUCY, "THE moon —"

Edward laid down his newspaper and looked up in the sky, where his wife was pointing. A waxing crescent moon, pale as a mermaid's face, thin as a willow whip, was visible in the translucent blue heavens, trailing the noontime sun by some twenty-five degrees.

"Pretty," said Edward, making to lift up his paper again.

"Pretty?" Lucy demanded. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What else should I say?"

"Well, what's it doing up there now? Isn't that weird? I mean, look, the sun's still up. It's only lunchtime."

Edward slowly folded his newspaper into quarters, stalling for a few seconds. His mind was disordered; his fine intellect, complex as a cat's

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cradle, had come completely unknotted in an instant. Lucy did this to him. Even after fifteen years of marriage, she still did this to him. All it took most times was a single utterance winging unexpectedly out of the conversational blue, or an idiosyncratic action. The day she had asked him what ocean Atlantic City fronted on. . . . Her puzzlement about why one had to apply the brakes when going into a curve. . . . The hurt incomprehension she had exhibited when she destroyed the microwave oven by trying to warm up a can of soup. . . .

It was at such times that Edward found himself utterly speechless, baffled by the unfathomable workings of Lucy's mind. She was quite clever in many ways. That much must be granted. And it wasn't a lack of logic she exhibited. Far from it. It was a kind of otherworldly, Carrollian logic she possessed, something utterly alien to his rational method of thinking.

He had believed he understood her before their wedding. They had, after all, known each other for most of their lives. Had been the traditional high school sweethearts, in fact. Surely such a long intimacy should have bred comprehension.

What a naive and pompous young idiot he had been! He realized quite fully now that he did not understand her at all, not in the slightest. Would never understand her. But he loved her, and that, he supposed, would have to suffice.

Trying to come up with a rational response to Lucy's objections to the moon's sharing of the sun's domain, Edward studied her where she lay. Reclining on a folding, towel-padded aluminum lawn chair, she wore the smallest of two-piece swimsuits. Her graceful limbs and slim torso were thoroughly oiled and buttered. Her small tummy resembled a shining golden hill, her sweat-filled navel a mysterious well or spring atop it. She was levered partway up on her right elbow and forearm, her eyes shaded with her left hand, facing Edward expectantly.

Knowing full well that it was all in vain, Edward tried to explain.

"There is no reason why the moon cannot be up at the same time as the sun. Because of the special way the sun and the moon and the earth spin around each other, the moon rises at a different time each day—"

"The moon rises?"

"Yes."

"It isn't just always there, but you see it only when the sun goes down?"

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Edward sighed deeply. "No. Now pay attention. If, one night, it rises at, say 11:00 PM, the next night it will rise later. Pretty soon it will be rising during the day, like now. Eventually it will go back to rising at night."

"Why should it work in such a complicated way?"

"Gravity—"

"Stop right there. You know I don't understand that word."

"Well, then, you'll never understand why the moon can be up during the day."

Lucy flopped back onto the lawn chair. "Maybe I don't want to understand. Maybe you're wrong. Maybe this is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and you just think you've seen the moon in the daytime before."

Edward started to get irritated. "Listen, I know what I know. The moon is often up during the daytime. I've seen it a hundred times, if I've seen it once."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No, honest, I'm not."

"Well, I've never seen it before."

"You've seen it now."

"Now is not always. Like you keep saying, 'One item does not make a series.'"

"Look for it tomorrow, then, if you don't believe me."

"Maybe I'll be doing something different tomorrow."

"Just forget it, then."

"Maybe I'll do just that."

Edward tried to resume reading his paper. For some reason he had lost all relish for it. In the back of his mind was a nagging uncertainty. Had he ever seen the moon by day before . . .?

Lucy spoke sleepily. "Why don't you take off that silly hat and get some sun?"

"I don't want to burn."

You stayed blanched all those summers we lived in the city. You should enjoy our new country life."

Edward had just received tenure at an urban-campused Ivy League college in the Northeast, where he taught philosophy. He and Lucy had promptly bought an old farmhouse forty-five minutes south of the city, in a sparsely populated district where cows outnumbered humans. Their

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property included five acres, one of which was lawn, the other four being scrub growth.

The time of the year was the first week of June.

"I can't see the sense of getting all greased up to lie mindlessly for hours in the sun."

"It feels good."

"I suppose."

"In fact, it feels so good that I'm taking off my suit. It's silly to wear it, out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Lucy, I don't know—"

But it was too late. In a mere second, Lucy had skinned out of her bikini. The twin white premises of her breasts and the conclusion of her pale pubic delta formed a wordless syllogism whose validity was insusceptible to proof.

Still, Edward felt professionally compelled to try.

Later that afternoon, after a lunch of curried chicken-salad sandwiches and Chardonnay, Lucy said, "You know what? I think I'm going to start a garden. It'll give me something to do."

"A garden? You've never grown anything before."

"That was when we lived in the city. Things are different now."

"What kind of garden? Flowers or vegetables?"

"Both."

"How will you even know where to begin?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll ask around. Maybe there's one of those whatchamacallits around here."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't be obtuse. You know what I mean."

"I do?"

"The place where the farmers get together for their hoedowns or hootenannies or whatever."

"A Grange"

"Yes, that's it. A Grange."

It was odd, this living in the country. Very strange and disturbing to the intellect. Nature had an effect. Yes, it must be admitted. The mind, much as it might like to think it was sovereign and independent, was hooked up to the body, and the body, in turn, was merely a quivering

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antenna receptive to a bewildering variety of sensory inputs. And out here, away from the city, amidst a wild profusion of growing things, of hidden, scurrying animals, of running water and blind stones migrating upward through the soil, the inputs were different. More persuasive in a subtle way—although perhaps less blatant—than car horns and advertisements, sirens and the smell of restaurants.

But there was more to it than individual stimuli, or even the sum of the novel sensations. There were the underlying patterns to consider, the ancient cycles and the total ecology of nature. Take just the seasons, for instance. In the city, they passed almost unnoticed. Street trees donned and doffed their cloaks of leaves, and no one paid any attention. Pigeons did not fly south for the winter. Any river big enough to notice was too big to ice over. Flowers were something one bought already cut and bundled.

Out here in the country, though, it was different. In just the couple of months that they had been living here, Edward had become attuned to the progress of the summer. In a way that was almost sly and sneaky, things changed. Plants that, a few weeks ago in May, had been tiny shoots were now monstrous weeds, bearing heavy, randy blossoms never bred by man. Where there had once been a clear line of sight from the front porch to the mailbox, there was now an impenetrable greenness. The sun now rose above that ancient oak, whereas formerly it had of a morning crowned that other tree. (Elm, sycamore, ash? How could one tell?)

And the way the discrete elements of the environment related to each other. . . . When the trumpet vine that climbed the tumbled stone wall along the eastern edge of their land had blossomed, the hummingbirds had materialized from nowhere. How had they known to come? The ants that stripped the chewed carcass that might have been a possum—what had summoned them? The cloud of delicate dandelion parasol seeds—what fitted them to be carried by the wind?

There was a kind of mindless fecundity behind it all, an inexhaustible and exuberant organic experimentation. What was it the writer Annie Dillard had said? That nature was "wasteful and extravagant of life. . . ." That seemed about right.

Edward had noticed unmistakable changes in himself since their residency here. For one thing, his attention was more liable to drift fron his work. He had fall-semester classes to prepare, scholarly papers to write, a book to outline. (It was to be a volume of philosophy for the

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layman, hopefully very popular, like what Sagan and Gould had done in their fields.) Despite these demands, he found himself spending useless hours outdoors, wandering along the game trails that threaded the adjoining woods, his mind wandering likewise, unable to focus on the work at hand.

(But was it totally empty during these walks, or rather, working in a different way, examining different, wordless topics . . . ?

And then, of course, there were the changes in Lucy. Back in the city, during his untenured years, she had done part-time librarian work to supplement his pay, and spent most of her free time as an expert shopper. Since the increase in his income and their subsequent relocation, she had quit her job and completely lost interest in the local stores or the more distant, inevitable mall. All it seemed she wanted to do was vegetate in the sun. That, or cook these intricate, peasant-type meals for them. Supper might be a big pot of thick stew and a crusty whole-grain loaf, still hot from the oven. Breakfast an omelet round and golden as the sun, accompanied by cornbread made with white meal and cooked in a cast-iron skillet in the oven, emerging like a scorched harvest moon.

Edward found himself putting on weight, like some country squire.

And now there was this matter of a garden. It was the last thing Edward would have predicted Lucy would want. (Of course, when had he ever been able to guess what she would do next?) It was certainly a harmless enough hobby. Maybe she would find some organization, whether called a Grange or something else, and get acquainted with some local folks who might provide her with company on days when he was working.

As for his own inability to concentrate—well, there was bound to be a period of adjustment connected with such major changes in their lives. Edward was certain that any day now he would be back to his old self.

Meanwhile, though, perhaps he'd just go out for a stroll. . . .

CAR TIRES chewed noisily on the gravel in the drive. Edward looked up gratefully from the disorganized pile of papers on his desk. Splotchy sunlight, filtered by the leaves of the large oak just outside the window, carpeted the varnished floor of his study with a pattern of shadow. The house had seemed empty without Lucy. Maybe now that she was home, they could go for a walk together. It wasn't

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as if he were accomplishing anything sitting here. . . .

Stepping through the wooden screen door onto the wide porch that wrapped itself around three-quarters of the old house, Edward was met by Lucy bounding up the steps from the verdant lawn. She grabbed him and whirled him around in a crazy little dance.

"I found it, I found it, I found it!"

Stepping back dizzily when released, Edward said, "My God, it could only be Leibniz's universal calculus—"

"No, dummy, the Grange."

Edward took Lucy's hand, and they went into the cool indoors.

"I stopped in at the Blue Label feedstore and asked the man there. He said there was a Grange in town. It's one of the oldest branches, in fact. They meet in that brick building with the waterwheel that we wondered about. It used to be a real flour mill hundreds of years ago, even before World War I."

"That old, huh?"

"Yes. And tonight there's going to be a meeting that the public can attend. At least the first part. The Grange is a society, you know. You have to be members before you can go to every meeting and function. But if we go tonight and show some interest, I think they'll ask us to join. The feedstore man said that most of the members were pretty old, and that they were always looking for younger people to belong."

"I guess we qualify, then. Anyway, I know you make me feel pretty young."

Edward grabbed Lucy's ass.

"About sixteen years old, I would estimate," she said.

"You should remember."

"Oh, I do."

Later Edward was motivated to pull down the proper volume of the *Encyclopedia Americana* and look up:

"GRANGE, one of the general farm organizations in the United States, formerly known as the Patrons of Husbandry. It is a secret, ritualistic society. Established in 1867 in Washington, D.C., by Oliver Hudson Kelley and six associates, its officers bear the titles of Grange Master, Overseer, Chaplain, Secretary, Treasurer, Steward, and Gatekeeper. . . ."

Neat, thought Edward. Each of the original seven founders got to be an officer. That's my kind of club . . . .

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Evening filled the woods with twilight. The tall trees surrounding the farmhouse—where the porch light defined a small circle of artificial day—had become towering, shadowy masses, rustling in a light breeze, seeming to exhale waves of moist coolness. Crickets chirruped. A chorus of falsetto frogs peeped cheerfully in a distant swamp. Stars began to burn through the canopy of night. The scent of new-mown grass filled Edward's nostrils as he and Lucy walked to the car. The crew of locals that maintained their property had been by that afternoon.

Just where the lawn met the gravel of the driveway, Lucy stopped. "Edward, look at this."

Edward saw an irregular ring of beautiful white mushrooms, each about three inches high, phallus-capped, rearing proudly above the mower-shortened blades of grass. They limned a hollow moon.

"The men must have missed it," he said, knowing even as he said it, as he stared unbelievingly at the cut grass beneath the ring, that he was not speaking the truth.

"No," Lucy said, "these things can sprout up fast. I've heard about them."

"In a couple of hours?"

"There it is."

"Well," said Edward, "Maybe they're good to eat."

"Oh no, we can't pick them—"

Edward decided not to mention that the landscapers would decapitate them next week.

Lucy drove them into town. She liked driving; Edward didn't. He tried to restrain his foot from pressing an imaginary brake pedal each time she took a curve.

The car radio played softly, a pop song sung by a nasal Australian voice:

I have the moon in my bed,
I have the sun in my heart,
I have the stars at my feet. . . .

There was a sizable parking lot attached to the old mill. Normally vacant those few times Edward had driven by, it was nearly full tonight. Lucy found an empty slot. The cars were those models Edward associated

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with his parents' generation: conservative Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Chevys.

Edward could read the bumper sticker on one, in the illumination of a streetlight:

HOWDY, STRANGER!
I'M A GRANGER!

"Corny."

"Be nice. These aren't academics. They're a different kind of people from any we know."

At the door to the mill, they were not far from the grassy banks of the stream that had once spun the wheel that had turned the grindstones in their immemorial embrace. The water flowed with a serene chuckling over weed-draped rocks and between reeds and rushes, its clean odor lying lightly on the night air.

The interior of the mill had long ago been subdivided into offices and meeting rooms. Here and there, portions of the original pegged beams showed through, like the skeleton of an old, old story poking its elbows through its modern dress. Everything was freshly painted and well-lit with modern fixtures. Edward and Lucy made their way down a corridor—corkboard hung with notices of farm equipment for sale, a table holding ag-school bulletins and a box full of food coupons for exchange, a forgotten pair of galoshes under the empty coat hooks—toward a room from which voices drifted.

The hall held fifty wood-slatted folding chairs, nearly all occupied. Edward and Lucy slid into a pair of empty seats at the back in what they hoped was an inconspicuous way.

Looking toward the front of the room, Edward saw a wooden dais bearing a table and seven chairs. The chairs were occupied by four old women and three old men. Each wore a yellow-and-white satin sash across their elderly chest. Their average age seemed about seventy. The woman in the middle, although remarkably unwrinkled, had to be in her nineties. . . .

The backdrop behind the Grange leaders was a green cloth on which was stitched a golden stalk of grain.

The meeting was already under way. One of the officers was detailing the status of the treasury in exquisitely tedious detail. Edward settled back into his chair, quite prepared to be very bored.

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The next forty-five minutes didn't disappoint him. Accounts of planned fund-raising activities, the success of a recent dance, news of crop prices, the formation of a committee to do political work for the Grange-backed candidate in the upcoming presidential election. . . .

Edward was just drifting off to sleep, when he was reprieved.

"This concludes the first half of tonight's Grange meeting," said one of the officers. "We will break for ten minutes. I must remind the general public that the second half of the meeting is closed to them."

Chairs scraped as people got to their feet. Edward stood. One leg had gone to sleep and now prickled painfully.

"Can we go now?"

"In a minute. We want to introduce ourselves first."

"We do?" Looking to his wife for an answer, Edward was taken aback.

Lucy's eyes were shining, as if the boring meeting had been some kind of rapturous experience for her. She seemed drawn to the people on the stage.

Edward shrugged and accompanied her up front.

From old-fashioned wall-mounted Seeburg speakers issued barely discernible music. Edward thought he recognized the old English ballad "John Barleycorn Must Die."

The officers had descended from the stage and now stood among the respectful crowd, softly conferring among themselves. Lucy approached the nearest, one of the men.

"Hello," she said, extending her hand. "My name's Lucy Pastorious, and this is my husband, Edward."

The white-haired man shook first Lucy's hand, then Edward's, and introduced himself. "Calvin Culver. I'm the Grange's Sower."

Had that been one of the Grange titles? Edward couldn't be sure, but he didn't think so.

"We're new residents of the town," continued Lucy, "and we're interested in joining the Grange."

Edward had an impression that he and Lucy were being instantly appraised, and found not too alien. Culver seemed honestly pleased at their interest. "We're always glad to see some young faces round here. The Grange can't go on without new blood. I don't think there'd be any problem about you two joining. Let me just introduce you to the rest of the sashes."

Culver turned toward his fellow officers and named them one by one.

"This is Betty Rhinebeck, our Attendant.

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"Roger Swain, our Presbyter.

"Alice Cotten, our Thresher.

"Edwin Landseer, our Plowman.

"Nancy Rook, our Sluicekeeper."

When Edward had finished shaking the fifth papery, dry old hand and making his fifth polite hello, he was certain of one thing. None of these titles were the same as the ones he had earlier found in the encyclopedia. Was this Grange a chapter of the Patrons of Husbandry, or was it a branch of some different organization? Had the titles changed with time? Or were false ones given to the public? If the latter, it seemed a needlessly mysterious practice. . . .

Edward suddenly realized that there remained one officer left to be introduced: the most senior woman, who had sat in the middle of the others. It occurred to Edward now that she had been the only one to remain unspeaking throughout the meeting.

Culver shepherded Lucy with evidence of great respect up to the small, trim woman. "This is Sally Lunn, the Grain Mistress."

Grain Mistress . . . ? What had happened to Grange Master?

Edward watched Lucy extend her hand. The woman took it, her simultaneously old and young face broadening into a smile showcasing perfect teeth. "So pleased to meet you at last, Mrs. Pastorious," said Sally Lunn.

Lucy's lips were slightly parted, as if she had started to speak but had her thought processes short-circuited. Sally Lunn released Lucy's hand, which continued to hang for a moment in midair.

Before he knew what was happening, Lucy had staggered back, and Edward had been invited forward.

"Edward," said Sally Lunn, "my pleasure." Then she took his hand.

His mind was somewhere deep under the earth. The rich smell of soil filled his nose, and cool clods sealed his eyes. He could blindly sense a twinned presence high above his head, calling him up. He struggled upward through the clinging loam, grew taller, taller, until he burst forth, into the ecstatic light, mingled gold and opal—

His hand and self were his own again. Somehow they were at the exit to the mill, having been escorted there by Calvin Culver.

"Sorry you folks have to leave now. But something tells me there won't be any problem about you joining. No sirree, none at all."

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EDWARD CONTEMPLATED his breakfast. Lucy had cooked a pot of Wheatena with raisins. She had mounded a hill of the gritty golden cereal into a bowl, deposited a dollop of honey into the center of it, and splashed a moat of milk into the bowl.

The golden hill and white ring around it had Edward mesmerized, as if it were an intricate mandala containing infinite depths of meaning.

Reluctantly, he jerked his attention away from the absolutely mundane image. Picking up his spoon, he broke through the dike containing the honey, let it runnel away into the milk, a golden thread. He stirred the whole mixture up into an amorphous mess and began to eat.

The cereal tasted especially sweet this morning, the day after they had attended the Grange.

Lucy sat down at the table, picked up her spoon, and dipped it into her own cereal. "Well, what about it?"

Edward was taken aback. He hadn't expected Lucy to beard him so soon about what they had agreed last night to postpone discussing. But he should have known, given her obvious excitement at the Grange meeting, that she would wait only the barest minimum of time.

Edward feigned ignorance. "About what?"

"Don't be an ape. What about us joining the Grange?"

Edward looked sheepishly down into his bowl. There was no way out of it now. "I don't think I want to."

"Let me guess why. You've got no time?"

"Well, yes, there's that. . . ."

"You aren't interested in the kind of things they do and talk about?"

"I suppose you could say that. . . ."

"You don't like the people? You think they're clodhoppers?"

"Well, now, I wouldn't go that far. . . ."

"You had the stuffing scared out of you by Sally Lunn?"

Edward said nothing. He looked up to find Lucy entreating him with shining eyes.

"Don't be scared, Edward. I felt it, too. I don't know what it was, but it was nothing to be frightened of. It was something entirely natural and good. I think maybe it was just some kind of saintliness or wisdom that comes, if you're lucky, when you get as old as she is. Maybe it has to do with her living out here in the country all her life. Whatever it was, I liked it. It made me feel good, like I understood for the first time what the world is all about.

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Sometimes I don't, you know. Sometimes, in fact, I think everyone but me knows the secret of how things work. You with all your talk about gravity, the way the plumber yelled at me that time I put the plaster down the drains— I get tired of feeling like such a big dope all the time. So I'm going to join the Grange. And that's that."

Edward struggled to speak. Lucy's words had made him sad. Did she really feel like that? Was he partly responsible?

"Lucy, I want you to be happy. Do whatever you want. I'll be glad if you join the Grange. But I just can't. You see, when you touched that old woman's hand, you felt confirmed in everything you knew. But I felt just the opposite. I felt as if a pit of quicksand had opened up underfoot, as if the whole world I had known and accepted as solid and rational were a sham—which can't be true. That old woman twisted my vision somehow and showed me everything in a new, unreasoning light. All the careful work I've put into explaining the world to myself and others was undone in a second. Maybe it was just momentary self-hypnosis. But I can't go through that again."

"And what," Lucy asked, "if she was showing you the truth?"

"I think," said Edward, "that I'd rather not accept that as a possibility."

Lucy scraped the last of her cereal up methodically and swallowed it. "That's fair, I guess. Will you at least help me with my kitchen garden?" She licked the bowl of her spoon sensuously like a big, lazy cat.

"Unfair tactics, and not strictly necessary. Of course I will."

"Good. I'm going into town and look up Mr. Calvin Culver, our Sower and tell him I'm in if they'll have me. You can work off a little of that spare tire you're accumulating by getting the grass up from that plot I marked near the back steps."

And with that, Lucy was gone.

Spare tire? And who had been feeding him such rich meals, as if fattening him up for a sacrifice? Was there no justice?

Edward did the breakfast dishes and went outside.

Even this early in the morning, the June sun was overpoweringly hot, a celestial bonfire. Soon Edward had his shirt off. The sharp, untried, shiny blade of the pointed shovel easily severed the ancient turf demarcated by stakes and string. Edward picked up each heavy clod by its green hair—disturbingly like a severed head—shook the moist earth from its roots, and tossed it aside. Fat and juicy flesh-colored earthworms, some truncated by

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his blade, wriggled away into the earth.

After some time, Edward had exposed a square of black earth some twenty feet on a side to the sun's curious stare. The gaze of that deity was already turning the soil a different, lighter shade as it dried. The pile of turfs made a small warrior's barrow.

Edward was resting on his shovel, his back glistening with sweat, when Lucy called out. "Hello! Come help me!"

Rather wearily, Edward went around to the front of the house. Lucy was struggling with some handled device sticking out of the car's trunk.

"I rented a Rototiller," she explained. "It'll save us some work."

"Us?"

"We're a team, aren't we?"

Edward wrestled the machine to the ground. "And your role on the team is—?"

"I'm the fructifying force."

Edward stopped in midmotion, astonished. "'Fructifying?' Where the hell did that come from? Good old Calvin Culver? Are you sure you don't mean—"

"Don't say it. You've got a filthy mind. Just do a good job, and you'll get your reward."

"Oh, by the way," she added as he wheeled the machine off, "I'm a Grange member now."

The Rototiller, despite its noise and stink, did make the job easier. Still, there were what seemed to be thousands of stones to bend over for and pluck from the newly turned earth. In a couple of hours, they soon formed a companion cairn to the sod barrow.

When it was over, Edward had never felt so tired in his life. Every muscle in his arms and legs and back ached. So this was the pastoral life. Ah, Arcadia! The city had never looked so fine. . . .

"Edward," called Lucy from the back porch. He turned, hoping she had brought something cool for him to drink.

She wore a circlet of daisies in her hair. And nothing else. Her body glowed white and tan as if lit from within. She stepped down the stairs with a motion like water falling. The air around her appeared to shiver. She crossed the lawn, her bare feet seeming to imprint the grass with a brighter greenness.

Edward was mesmerized. He felt hot and cold at once. Then his

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unknown wife, her eyes filmed with a cool light, was upon him, unbuckling his pants, finding him unsurprisingly ready, and pulling him down to the broken soil.

The earth was cool and moist beneath his knees and palms. He wondered briefly what it felt like to supine Lucy. Then there was nothing left of him to wonder.

When it was over, Edward had never felt so refreshed in his life. Every muscle in his arms and legs and back throbbed with vitality. So this was the pastoral life. . . .

"You don't pay the lawn-maintenance guys this way, do you?"

Lucy wasn't listening to him. She was looking up into the infinite sky. Edward cast his own gaze over his shoulder, and saw the moon watching them.

"Now it will blossom," Lucy said.

That same evening, Lucy announced she was going out.

"There's a Grange meeting tonight."

"So soon?"

"It's an emergency. We have to deal with the gypsy moths."

"You mean those stupid caterpillars that are chewing up all the trees? I thought there was nothing that stopped them short of spraying. And the town council's voted against that."

"Sally has a plan."

Lucy was gone till after midnight. When she crawled into their bed, beneath the down comforter the country nights still made a necessity, Edward came half-awake.

"How'd it go?" he murmured sleepily.

"Shhh, go back to sleep. I'll tell you in the morning."

But in the morning there was no need to ask, for the gypsy moths lay dead in heaps everywhere.

* * *

All work on his book had gone by the board. Edward found he couldn't concentrate on what had once seemed so important to him. It wasn't the environment that was distracting him anymore, though. At least not firsthand. He had realized with a start, soon after the wild coupling with Lucy on the garden bed, that his senses had become harmonized to the

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natural world somehow, had achieved a rapprochement with the forces of sunlight and soil, leaf and limb. These forces did not make the same demands on his attention as they had when they were new to him. He found he could go about his daily living without paying much overt attention to the bewitching, continually varying play of light and odors around him.

Not that Nature had vanished or retreated from the back of his mind or the depths of his gut. No, that had not happened, no more than one's heart or lungs had ceased to function, simply because they went hourly unheard.

No, what preoccupied Edward now was trying to find out what Lucy had gotten herself involved in.

What exactly was this organization known as the Grange?

Here and now, in mid-June, this question—along with its corollary, Was the Grange good or bad for his wife?—filled all of Edward's mind. He attacked it the only way he knew how, short of confronting the Grange members themselves (something he was surprisingly reluctant to do), and that was through research.

Every morning, Edward set out for the city, leaving Lucy behind to tend to her garden. He worried about what she might be getting up to, picturing her reenacting their fructifying ritual, only with other partners. Then he would admonish himself for a fool. Lucy, despite her newfound interest in matters horticultural, was still the same woman he had always known, and wouldn't do that to him. Besides, any such activity would surely crush the tiny seedlings that now sprouted where Edward and Lucy had tumbled, and even the sturdier shoots of the transplanted tomatoes, and Lucy wouldn't stand for that. The garden seemed to be her whole life lately. In the end, there was nothing Edward could or would do if she wanted to rut all day, so he dismissed it from his mind as best he could.

On the campus, moving from stack to dusty stack in the various familiar libraries where he had spent so much time—and which now seemed so alien—Edward sought answers to the meaning of the Grange and what it stood for.

He confirmed in detail the brief encyclopedia entry he had read on that day, seemingly ages gone by. The Grange, if this was indeed the same one, had been the brainchild of Oliver Hudson Kelley in 1867. (The word "grange" came from the same Latin root as "grain," *granum*, and meant merely a storehouse for grain.) He dug into Kelley's past. The man had been an immigrant; his father Irish, his mother French. There the personal trail

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petered out. Edward switched to the public practices of the Grange.

On the surface, the Grange's history was one of promoting solidarity among farmers, for the benefit of both individual farmers and farmers as a class. Antitrust, transportation, and education laws were agitated for; cooperatives established; research promoted. There was a social side to the Grange, too. Dances, harvest suppers, lectures. It all seemed extremely innocuous today—although, of course, at the time, it had been considered quite radical and dangerous.

But through all his readings, Edward began to accumulate the feeling that this surface level of activity was not everything, was not even the most important reason for the Grange's existence. There was something unspoken beneath the primary texts of a century ago, half a century ago, even two decades ago, something that popped up only now and then, as if it were too powerful to keep completely submerged, rearing its massive green head like the crown of an ancient thick-boled oak bursting full-grown and -leafed through the bland surface of the earth.

And the unspoken secret seemed, Edward slowly realized, to revolve around a woman—or women—known as Sally Lunn, and how she was . . . well, there was no word for it but *worshiped.*

From a privately printed, anonymously authored book titled *Gleanings and Chaff: An Amateur Agriculturalist's Experiences with the Patrons of Husbandry, 1879,* whose spine was broken and pages flaking:

> *Sallie Lunne was present that night, for the first time since I had attended the Grange, and I was told to show all proper respect and deference to this old dame, although how she differed from any farmer's elderly wife I could not immediately apprehend. I was told by the Grange's Thresher that Dame Lunne was not her baptismal name, but an appellation given to the woman who filled the role of Grain Mistress, and that therefore each branch of the Grange boasted its own Mistress Lunne, simultaneously in attendance all across this broad land—nay, even the globe.*
>
> *Mistress Lunne seemed a taciturn, even dull, sort, and spoke not a word during the Grange meeting itself. But afterward, when I was brought forward to be presented to her, I was forced to revise my hasty first impression.*
>
> *Her exact words I do not recall, but know with a certainty that*

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they most favorably impressed me with her strength of character and Demeter-like vitality. She seemed a veritable fount and wellspring of pastoral virtues, her high office having caused her to transcend herself, and her touch was correspondingly galvanic. It is hard to overstate her effect on those made of lesser stuff.

Even more difficult of relation is the aspect she dons during certain private Granger rituals. But I can say no more. . . .

ONE MORNING, prior to leaving for the city, Edward took his coffee out to the back porch. Lucy was still in the shower. Edward hadn't told her what he was doing on campus each day; she thought, he believed, that he was working on his book.

His eyes drifted toward their vegetable garden. It was nine days since he had turned the soil with such backbreaking labor, and he hadn't paid much attention to it in the interval.

The tomato plants were spilling over their wire cages, heavy ripe fruit bedecking their leafy sprawl. Peas were ready to pick, as was an abundance of lettuce, eggplants, cucumbers, and zucchini.

Lucy emerged, barefoot, robed, and toweling her hair. "Oh, I'm sorry—Did I scare you?" she asked.

Dabbing ineffectually at his coffee-soaked shirt, Edward said, "Just clumsy, I guess." He set his empty cup and saucer down noisily on the porch rail. Then his eyes caught on what was nailed above the back door.

Lucy followed his gaze. "It's a sprig of touch-leaf," she explained. "Saint-John's-wort. Aren't all those golden flowers beautiful?"

"Beautiful, yeah, they are. I guess. Why's it there?"

"To guard against thunder, lightning, and fire. There's a spray over the front door, too."

Lucy regarded her husband as if waiting for him to inquire further, or contest what she had said. Edward didn't bite. He was just waiting for what came next. Something had to come next. It was in Lucy's eyes. They were floating in that same opalescent light as on the day the two of them had consecrated the miraculous garden.

"Saint John's Eve is just a few days away, you know. Midsummer Night. It's an important day for the Grange. There'll be a lot going on. Do you think you might come?"

"I—I'll see. Listen, I've got to be going now. A lot of research to finish—"

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Lucy kissed him chastely good-bye. "If you call, I might be out. There's a red tide on the coast, and we're helping the local Grange there to deal with it."

"I see," said Edward.

The car radio confirmed that one of the nuisance-making algal blooms had just been spotted that morning. Edward didn't give it a snowball's chance in hell of lasting more than a day.

Edward had run into a dead end investigating the Grange itself. Nowhere were the more arcane practices he suspected them of described in detail. He was forced to turn to anthropological and mythological works, notably Graves's *The Greek Myths*, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Campbell's *World Mythology*.

In the Frazer, he found that the ceremony he and Lucy had participated in was old, old, old, as old as agriculture itself. Fucking in a field, by couple or community, to ensure fertility, was a ritual found from Central America to New Guinea to Central Africa to the Ukraine. Edward could now personally testify to its efficacy.

There were a hundred, a thousand other bizarre and not-so-bizarre practices connected with raising crops. An activity so central to civilization could not have failed to accumulate myriad superstitions over the millennia, contributions from every ethnic and racial group known to history. Druids, Gauls, Bantu, Aztecs, Greeks, Romans, Seminoles, Apache—Edward wallowed in the descriptions till his head reeled. Intercourse with trees, beating recalcitrant crops, supplicating the rain and sun, chastising the moon, sacrificing animals and humans—

Which of these did the Grange practice?

Sacrifice?

Human sacrifice?

Yes, Edward was suddenly convinced. He was the intended victim for the Saint John's Eve festivities. Coinciding with the summer solstice, after which the days began to shorten and vegetation implicitly to die, the archaic holiday was marked with propitiations to distant winter. In Russia, a straw figure was drowned in a stream. The Druids burned their sacrificial king in the Midsummer bonfires. This was why Lucy had been fattening him up, like some hapless Hansel. Oh Lord, what was he going to do?

Almost blinded by tears of fear and disappointment at the treachery of

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his wife, Edward continued to flip uselessly through the pages of the book before him. A phrase leaped out at him: . . . *known as soleil lune.*

He backtracked.

A large, round cake was baked from the summer's first harvest of grain and consecrated to the Sun and the Moon, twin tutelar deities of husbandry, by whose radiant beneficence the crops ripened, and by whose phases propitious times for sowing and reaping were determined. This cake was ritually broken and shared among the community. Known as soleil lune *in France, this symbolic body of Ceres was, due to misunderstanding of the original phrase, called Sally Lunn in England. . . .*

* * *

The flames soared high. Edward could see them from across the field in the night. A circle of leaping bonfires, they ringed a small wooded hill. The air was thick with their smoke, and with the richness of the Midsummer vegetation.

Lucy handled the jouncing car well on the rutted dirt road. She whistled as she drove. Edward, slumped miserably in his seat, thought he recognized again "John Barleycorn Must Die."

In the end, he had agreed to accompany Lucy to the Grange's ceremony. What else could he do? If Lucy wanted to get rid of him, then there was no reason for him to go on living. He had never quite realized what she meant to him until now. Only her apparent abandonment of him as a sacrifice to her new religion had showed Edward the depths of his ties to her. She had been everything that had supported him in his work, his bastion during hard times, his joy during good. If their life together was at an end, he'd at least be loyal to her up to the ultimate moment, for all they had shared, even if she had betrayed him.

The car came to a stop amidst others, the same old models that had been parked outside the Grange hall. The early arrivals, Edward saw, were standing near the fires, lit with gold, partly shadowed.

Lucy levered open her door and stepped nimbly to the sweet-smelling, trodden hay grass. Edward dragged himself out of the car.

"Are you O.K., dear? Are you sure you want to be here tonight?"

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Edward nodded dumbly. How could she be so appallingly blithe at his imminent demise?

They walked toward the crowd. Sally Lunn was not visible. The other six elderly officers separated themselves and approached. They were wearing their sashes and nothing else, their old carcasses somehow not pitiful or funny, but immensely dignified and potent. They carried archaic flails and scythes.

"Is your husband ready?" one asked. Edward thought he recognized Roger Swain, the Presbyter.

"Yes."

"We will escort him. You must remain behind." Swain took Edward by the elbow. The six officers and Edward began to walk uphill.

Looking up as he ascended, Edward stared full into the beaming face of the moon. Where had it come from? A moment ago it had been nowhere in sight. . . . He stumbled, and was forced to drop his gaze. When he looked up again, there were only innumerable stars.

By the time he reached the top, he was winded, more from fear than physical exertion. Under the dark trees, away from the flames, he could hardly see. They stopped to let his eyes adjust. Edward thought he saw an openwork structure, like a giant wicker beehive. They moved toward it.

The structure was an airy hut woven of willow withes. Sally Lunn sat cross-legged inside it, clothed in a robe. Edward could feel her presence from six feet away.

"Happy Saint John's Eve, Edward. We're glad you could make it."

The other officers had faded respectfully back and left him alone with Sally Lunn.

Edward collapsed nervelessly to the earth. He thought he could hear the gentle purling of a stream or spring nearby.

"Do you know who I am now?" asked Sally Lunn.

Edward shook his head no.

"I think you do. I am the Sun and the Moon and the Earth. I am Ceres and Gaea and Demeter, Persephone and Hecate. I am the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. I am burgeoning and fecundity, blossom and fruit. Do you acknowledge this?"

Edward's lips were very dry. "Yes," he whispered.

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"Do you know why you are here tonight?"

"Not really. But I can guess."

"It's because of your wife."

"I know that much—"

"Quiet. You know nothing. Your wife is a very important person. Look at me. This body I inhabit is one of a few special ones, receptive to me. I come into it only from time to time. I am immortal. But although I can lend it a few years, this body is not immortal. In fact, it will soon go to feed the soil. This chapter of the Grange will be without their Sally Lunn. The important work they do would falter without guidance. But your wife—"

Revelation burst on Edward then, and he dared to get to his feet and interrupt. "You mean to possess her."

"I already have."

The officers had drifted back silently during Edward's audience, and now stood outside the door of the hut. Sally Lunn spoke softly.

"It only remains for you, as Lucy's husband, to marry me."

Edwin Landseer, the Plowman, was helping Edward to remove his clothes, while Betty Rhinebeck, the Attendant, was slowly pulling the robe off Sally Lunn's wrinkled shoulders. The Presbyter was aspersing them both with crisp water, while Alice Cotten, the Thresher, plumped up a bed of fragrant herbs and ferns. As Edward stared, Sally Lunn's robe pooled about her waist.

She was no longer old. She was young as spring, a nymph with unmottled skin and abundant flesh, supple as a reed. Her hair was as thick as wheat in a field. She looked like Lucy and like every woman he had ever coveted. A heady perfume rose from her loins, indistinguishable from the earth.

Nancy Rook, the Sluicekeeper, was behind Sally Lunn, lowering her backward to the bracken. The goddess dug her heels into the ground and arched her back off the ground so her robe could be removed from underneath her, then finally pulled off her uplifted feet when she settled back down.

Calvin Culver, the Sower, guided Edward between her legs.

It was infinitely more intense than what Edward had experienced with Lucy in the garden. And that had been the headiest sex he had ever had.

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He rose to meet the sun.

He answered the moon's pull.

He tasted the earth.

He was a long, hot root in the soil.

He found the spring, the honeyed well on the hill, and drank deep.

It felt as immemorially old as the grinding of one stone against another, with the grain being crushed between.

Then he flowered whitely, like an anemone.

When it was over, he lay for a time in Sally Lunn's arms, eyes closed. He dared not look whether she was young or old again.

"Would you die for me right now, Edward?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I am pleased to say it won't be necessary. But someday I might ask again."

After a quiet interval, he somehow knew he was expected to get up and redon his clothes, so he did. The sashes came to lead him back downhill. He looked over his shoulder once, like Orpheus. The hut was empty.

The fires were dying down, the people dispersing. He found Lucy. Her hair was crazy, and her shirt hung out of her pants.

Driving back home, he was too baffled at being alive to be able to talk.

But in bed, holding the wife he had never known, whom he had so recently remarried, he found his voice and asked, "What I did tonight—it doesn't bother you?"

Sleepily, Lucy said, "But why should it, dear? She was only me."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE UNCHANGING AMOUNT

MY FAMILY and friends tend to use me as a walking encyclopedia. This is flattering, but can easily be a source of embarrassment to me when it turns out that I do not know everything after all.

My beautiful daughter, Robyn, had learned of this know-it-all reputation by the time she was ten. I was away on a trip, and my first wife, Gertrude, and her visiting brother, John, got into a controversy that could not be resolved. They therefore sent Robyn upstairs to get the appropriate volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Robyn was most reluctant to take the trouble, and halfway up the stairs, she shouted, "If Daddy were here, you could just ask him."

My friend the science fiction writer Lin Carter called me once and said, "Isaac, who said, 'Liberty! Liberty! What crimes are committed in thy name!'"

I answered, without hesitation, "Madame Jeanne Roland, on her way to the guillotine in 1793." That seemed to astonish him.

However, I sometimes fail. A year or so ago, my friend the science fiction writer L. Sprague de Camp, called me from his home in Texas. "Isaac," he said, "I need to know the wavelengths of the ultrasonic waves emitted by bats in flight. I can't find the information, but I'm sure you would know it off-hand."

"I'm sorry, Sprague," I said, "I do not know it off-hand, but I will go through my reference library and see if I can find it. If I do, I will call you back."

I then began to ransack my library and found, rather to my astonishment, that all the books I was sure would have the information did not. Even the Encyclopedia Britannica failed me. I was about to give up, when I thought I'd try the Encyclopedia Americana, and there, in an article on "Sound," was the information I wanted on bat

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squeaks. I called Sprague and read it off to him.

"Thanks, Isaac," he said, "that's just what I wanted."

After he hung up, I began to brood about the information having been presented so clearly and concisely. I went back to the start of the article and began to read. It was very well-written and that displeased me. I don't like to see other science writers doing a good job. So I looked at the end of the article to see what scoundrel had written the piece. And there, in bold print, was the name — Isaac Asimov. I had forgotten that I had written an article on "Sound" for the Encyclopedia Americana.

Things like that, however, always encourage me to continue my endless series for F & SF, and so here we go again.

Last month, I spoke about the conservation of momentum, where momentum is the product of mass and velocity (mv). Most scientists, including the Englishman Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and the Frenchman Rene Descartes (1596-1650) took this as a measure of motion.

This was disputed by the German scientist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Leibniz was one of the greatest scientists who ever lived, but he had the incredible misfortune to be an almost exact contemporary of the still-greater Newton, and to have engaged in controversies with him. That led to the underrating of Leibniz, particularly in the English-speaking countries.

Leibniz advanced reasons for supposing that the measure of motion was related to the mass multiplied by the square of the velocity (mv^2), and in this he was more nearly right than Newton was.

Leibniz was also the first to point out the importance of a quantity that represented a force moving a mass over a distance against a resistance. This product of force and distance (fd) was called a variety of names but, in 1829, the French physicist Gustave Gaspard de Coriolis (1792-1843) was the first to call it "work." He also pointed out that it was more convenient to speak, not of mv^2, but of "$\frac{1}{2} mv^2$."

Work, in the scientific sense, is not quite the same as work in the ordinary sense. Thus, if I were to lift a heavy suitcase a few inches off the ground, I would be doing an amount of work equal to the mass of the suitcase, multiplied by the distance it was raised against the pull of gravity.

If, however, I then held the suitcase in place at the height to which I had lifted it, I would gradually grow very tired, and it would seem like "hard work" to me. But it isn't.

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As long as the suitcase doesn't move against the pull of gravity, no work, in the scientific sense, is being done. What you feel as "hard work" is the result of the molecules of the muscles being forced to retain their contracted state against the natural tendency to relax. You can see that if you shove a piece of wood under the suitcase and let the suitcase rest on it. The wood would hold up the suitcase as your arms did, but it would never grow tired and it would not do any work. (I wish, for this reason, that work in the scientific sense had been called something else, but it's too late now.)

Anything capable of doing work, such as your muscles, contains "energy." Energy is from Greek words meaning "work within." The word was first used in 1807 by the British physicist Thomas Young (1773-1829).

The expression $\frac{1}{2}mv^2$ represents "kinetic energy," where "kinetic" is from a Greek word for "motion." It is the energy possessed by a moving object. A motionless baseball will do no work. A thrown baseball can easily break a window. A baseball thrown by a fast-ball pitcher can kill a man if it hits him on the skull. Things that are still more massive and move still more rapidly can do much more work of a damaging kind. Think of a cannonball.

* * *

But where does the kinetic energy come from? We make a ball move by throwing it, but trying to deal with what goes on in the living body introduces complications we don't need.

Let's make it simple. Imagine a ball being held motionless at some height. Because it has no motion, it has no kinetic energy. If, however, it is released, it promptly responds to the pull of gravity and begins to fall, so that it gains kinetic energy. Because it falls more and more rapidly with time (as was first pointed out by the Italian scientist Galileo [1564-1642] in the 1590s), it gains more and more kinetic energy as it falls. How much kinetic energy it gains by the time it strikes the ground depends on how high the ball was suspended in the first place.

Obviously, there is not only an energy of motion but an energy of position in the gravitational field. This was first pointed out clearly, in 1803, by a French engineer, Lazar Nicolas Marguerite Carnot (1753-1823). (Carnot is better known as an honest and efficient French Revolutionary, who built up the French army after the first period of chaos of the Revolution, and thus laid the groundwork for Napoleon's later victories.)

In 1853, this energy of position was first called "potential energy"

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by the British engineer William John Macquorn Rankine (1820-1872) for obvious reasons.

The potential energy we generally speak of is that within a gravitational field, but there are phenomena other than gravitation that will cause motion. Electricity will do it, for instance, and if an object is held steady against the tendency of an electric field to make it move, that object then has potential energy within an electric field, and so on.

However, the matter of kinetic energy and potential energy was first recognized with respect to the ubiquitous gravitational field we are all immersed in, and we'll stick to that. The two forms of energy, taken together, can be termed "mechanical energy."

It is the common experience of humanity that if an object is hurtled straight up into the air, its speed steadily decreases as it mounts higher. In short, its kinetic energy starts at some high level when it is on the ground and when its potential energy is zero. As it rises, the kinetic energy decreases, but the potential energy increases. Finally, it reaches a maximum point at which it stops rising. Its kinetic energy is then zero and its potential energy is at the highest. After that, the ball begins to fall, losing potential energy and gaining kinetic energy.

Since the ball returns to the ground with the same speed that it left, that gave rise to the notion of the "conservation of mechanical energy" — that the sum of kinetic and potential energy always remains the same in a closed system.

The only trouble is that it doesn't. If you let a ball bounce, it will reach a slightly smaller height with each bounce and will finally dribble to a halt. Both potential energy and kinetic energy would decline to zero. Where did they go? They either had to go somewhere or else the law of conservation of mechanical energy simply isn't true.

Or suppose you roll a ball across a rough surface. It gradually slows, without ever leaving the surface. The kinetic energy disappears, but no potential energy appears to compensate that loss. Again, where did the kinetic energy go?

It turned out with time that other forces that could induce motion and do work, other forms of energy, could not be conserved either. They all dribbled down to nothing with time.

It was rather disappointing that energy would not be conserved, for conservation is a neat arrangement and scientists like the Universe to be neat.

Let us pass on to heat, then.

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Heat flows spontaneously from a hotter object to a cooler one, much in the way that water flows, spontaneously, from a higher position to a lower. It was only natural, then, to think of heat as a kind of fluid. The French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) wrote a chemistry book in 1794 in which he listed the materials he considered "elements" (substances that could not be broken down into still simpler substances). Among these elements, he listed light and heat. Heat he considered to be a fluid which he called "caloric" from a Latin word for "heat."

The fluid theory made it possible to deal with many manifestations of heat without trouble, but even so, various scientists (even Lavoisier) speculated that heat might be a form of motion. These were only speculations, however, and what one needs in science is experimental evidence. The first to supply this was Benjamin Thompson (1753-1814), better known as Count Rumford.

Thompson was an American, but during the Revolutionary war, he was a Tory and spied for the British. As a result, he thought it better to leave with the British when they left Boston. After the United States gained its independence, Thompson went to Europe and remained there. He eventually entered the service of Elector Karl Theodor of Bavaria, and it was from him that he got his title.

In 1798, Rumford was supervising the boring of cannon, and he noticed that the blocks of metal grew hot as blazes as the boring tool gouged them out. They had to be cooled consistently with water.

The orthodox explanation for this was that caloric was being loosened from the metal as the metal was broken down into shavings by the boring device. However, the heating continued as long as the boring went on, and enough caloric was removed from the metal being bored to have melted that metal if it were poured back in. In other words, more caloric was being removed from the metal than could possibly have been contained in it to begin with.

What's more, caloric could not be produced by the break-up of the metal. Rumford made use of a boring instrument that was so dull it did not shave off any pieces of metal. Nevertheless, if he ground that dull boring device into the metal, more heat, not less, was produced than if he had used a sharp one.

Rumford's conclusion was that the mechanical motion of the borer was being converted to heat and that heat was therefore a form of motion, motion of tiny fragments

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of the metal. This result was obtained not by speculation but by experiment. Rumford tried to calculate how much heat was produced by a given quantity of mechanical energy and was the first to set a figure for what we now call "the mechanical equivalent of heat." The figure he obtained was far too high, but it was a start.

Another experiment, conducted not long after by the British chemist Humphry Davy (1778-1829), led to the same conclusion. Davy set up a system in which ice was rubbed mechanically at temperatures that were maintined a degree below the freezing point. There was insufficient caloric in the whole system, according to the orthodox view, to melt the ice, and yet it melted. Davy decided that the mechanical motion was converted to heat.

In 1803, the British chemist John Dalton (1766-1844) advanced the atomic theory, and scientists began to believe that all matter was composed of tiny atoms and molecules. It was the motion or vibration of these that might represent heat.

In the 1860s, the British physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) and, independently, the Austrian physicist Ludwig Edward Boltzmann (1844-1906), in the 1870s, developed a mathematical treatment that firmly established the motion theory of heat. Heat was the motion of atoms and molecules, and the more rapid the average motion the greater the intensity of heat (that is, the "temperature").

Once the notion of heat as a form of motion began to take hold, there would naturally be those who felt that the conservation of energy would work if only heat were taken into account. If a moving object came to rest, it must be because the object's motion was converted into the motion of atoms and molecules, that is, into heat.

The first to point this out was a German physicist, Julius Robert Mayer (1814-1878). In 1842, he presented a figure for the mechanical equivalent of heat, based on an experiment in which a horse powered a mechanism that stirred paper pulp in a cauldron. He compared the work done by the horse with the temperature rise in the pulps, and his figure was better than that of Rumford.

Mayer, in reporting on this experiment, expressed his belief that, counting heat, energy was conserved; that the law of conservation of energy held even for living systems; and that solar energy was the ultimate source of all energy on Earth, both living and non-living.

Unfortunately, Mayer was a physician and not a University

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academic, and his work was totally disregarded. Even when the law of conservation of energy was accepted a few years later, Mayer received no credit for being first. In fact, Mayer's life was a tissue of incredible misfortunes. In 1848, two of his children died, and his brother was involved in revolutionary activities. Mayer tried to commit suicide in 1849 by jumping from a third-story window, but merely injured his legs permanently. In 1851, he was taken to a mental institution for a period of time and there he was cruelly treated.

After release, he lived in such obscurity that when the German chemist Justus von Leibig (1803-1873) lectured, with praise, on Mayer's work, he assumed that Mayer was dead. That, however, brought Mayer appreciation at last, and he received the Copley medal in 1871.

Next came the work of the British physicist James Prescott Joule (1818-1889). He had to run his father's brewery, which cut into his time, but he was a virtual fanatic on the measurement of heat. In his teens, he was already publishing papers in which he was measuring heat in connection with electric motors.

He went on to devote years to measuring the heat produced by every kind of work he could think of. He churned water and mercury with paddles. He passed water through small holes to heat it by friction. He expanded and contracted gases. Even on his honeymoon, he took time out to devise a special thermometer to measure the temperature of the water at the top and bottom of a scenic waterfall his wife and he were to visit. After all, kinetic energy of the falling water should be converted to heat.

In all those cases, he calculated the amount of work that had entered the system and the amount of heat that came out, and he found that the same amount of work, of whatever kind, always produced the same amount of heat. He calculated, in 1843, that 41,800,000 ergs of work produced one calorie of heat.

Joule was not the first to calculate the mechanical equivalent of heat. Rumford and Mayer had beaten him to the punch, but Joule's was the first accurate value, and the first to be backed by a large variety of different experiments. In his honor, a unit of work equal to 10,000,000 ergs is now called the "joule," so that 4.18 joules of work equal one calorie of heat.

Joule's first full description of his experiment appeared in 1847, and he made it plain that, if heat is counted, then energy is conserved. However, his work, like Mayer's, but with even less excuse, went

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disregarded. Joule was not a university academician either, so that high-brow scientists of the academic world turned up their nose at him.

In fact, his paper was rejected by various learned journals as well as by the Royal Society. He was forced to present his paper at a public lecture in Manchester and then get the speech published in full by a reluctant Manchester newspaper on which his brother was the music critic.

A few months later, he finally managed to present it before an unsympathetic scientific gathering, and his presentation would have passed almost unnoticed but for a twenty-three-year-old youth in the audience, whose comments on Joule's work were shrewd enough and logical enough to rouse interest and even enthusiasm. Joule's reputation was made.

The young man who saved the situation was the British physicist William Thomson (1824-1907), who, late in life, became Lord Kelvin, by which title he is now better known.

In that same year of 1847, a German physicist, Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz (1821-1894), took up the cudgels. He was not only a University academician, but he was a German (which was then the highest form), and he had achieved important results in a variety of branches of science. He was equally at home in physics and physiology.

He analyzed the situation with respect to the law of conservation of energy so clearly and cogently that it was impossible not to accept it. For that reason, Helmholtz is usually considered to be the person who established the law, to the underappreciation of the work of Mayer and of Joule.

Helmholtz went on to consider the source of the Sun's energy in the light of the law of conservation of energy, the first to take up the problem. His reasoning was faultless, and he came up with a radically wrong answer only because the existence of nuclear energy was not to be known for another half a century.

The law of conservation of energy can be known, alternatively, as "the first law of thermodynamics." The most general way of presenting it is this: "The total energy of the Universe is constant." Another way, and more familiar, is to say, "Energy can be changed from one form to another, but it can neither be created nor destroyed." Either way, the energy supply of the universe is an unchanging amount.

This sounds like an extraordinarily optimistic statement.

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Since energy is required for work, and since the amount of energy available never decreases, why, then, hurray! — we will be able to squeeze work out of the Universe forever.

Unfortunately, that is not the way the Universe runs, and this first became clear in connection with the steam engine.

The first steam engine to be put to use in industry was invented by the English engineer Thomas Newcomen (1663-1729). In it a chamber was filled with steam, which was cooled and allowed to condense, producing a vacuum. The water in a mine would be sucked up into the chamber and gotten rid of. The chamber was then filled with steam again, over and over, so that the steam engine acted as a pump.

However, enormous quantities of heat had to be put into heating up the chamber each time, to get it to the point where it held steam, and that heat could not be used to do the work of pumping. Only about one percent of the heat was converted into work.

In 1769, the British engineer James Watt (1736-1819) conceived the idea of using two chambers, one of which was always kept hot and the other cold. The hot chamber could be filled with steam, which could then be allowed to escape into the cold chamber to condense, while the hot chamber was filled with more steam. In such a steam engine as much as seven percent of the heat could be turned into work. The Watt engine quickly took over and, since Watt also devised ways of converting the in-and-out motion of a piston into the turning of a wheel, his engine became the foundation of the Industrial Revolution.

A French physicist, Nicholas Leonard Sadi Carnot (1796-1832), the son of the man who first grasped the notion of potential energy, investigated the matter of steam engine efficiency.

In a book he published in 1824, Carnot was able to show that the percentage of the heat that could be converted into work by a steam engine, even under the most favorable circumstances (no friction, no heat loss to the outside world) depended entirely on the difference in temperature between the hot chamber and the cold chamber. If the hot chamber is at 110 C and the cold chamber is at 40 C, then, at the very most, 22 percent of the heat can be converted to work.

This was the first occasion on which it was shown that the presence of energy alone was not enough. What counted was "free energy"; that is, that portion of the energy that could be converted to work, and this was always less than the total energy. This was the first

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glimpse of what came to be called the "second law of thermodynamics."

Carnot's discovery was generalized in 1851 by William Thomson, who had saved Joule from obscurity.

He introduced the notion of the degradation of energy. In other words, if we consider any form of energy other than heat — electricity, for instance — it can be totally converted to heat, every last bit of it. In the process, some of that energy can be converted to work, often with high efficiency. Never with total efficiency, however, for there are always factors such as circuit resistance, friction, radiation, and so on, that convert the energy to heat more or less directly without its prior conversion into work. (Of course, what is converted into work also degrades to heat eventually.)

This means that all forms of energy are converted to heat, and, if we are to get work therefore, it will have to be out of heat.

This is not impossible. For one thing, heat can be converted into other forms of energy, though not totally, never totally. Only to a certain extent — so that all forms of energy in the Universe, other than heat, are steadily declining in quantity.

But then, too, heat can be turned into work directly, without its having to be turned into some other form of energy.

To do this, however, heat must be present in different intensities, a hotter region here and a cooler region there. It's the difference in temperature out of which we can get work, but, as we extract work, the difference in temperature declines until all the heat is at the same temperature. Where a quantity of heat is at the same temperature — no matter how much heat there might be — then no work at all can be obtained from it.

We see a Universe, then, in which all forms of energy other than heat will eventually degrade to heat, and one in which this heat will even out in temperature, so that the Universe will then possess all the energy it always possessed but none of it will be convertible into work. This is sometimes called "the heat-death of the Universe."

This is the second law of thermodynamics: "Though the total energy of the Universe is constant, the amount of free energy decreases steadily."

Fortunately for ourselves, the free energy supply of the Universe is enough to keep it going for trillions of years. We don't have to worry, in the course of our lifetime, or in the course of humanity's existence, that we will run out of energy in forms that are convertible to work.

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Another way of looking at the second law of thermodynamics is to say that the disorder of the Universe is constantly increasing. Energy, left to itself, tends to degrade and become disorderly, and when all of it is converted to heat, and the heat is all reduced to the same temperature, the disorder is at a maximum.

In 1850, a German physicist, Rudolf Julius Emmanuel Clausius (1822-1888), worked out a mathematical expression in which one symbol stood for the disorderliness of energy. (Eventually, in 1865, he named this symbol "entropy" for no clear etymological reason.)

Using Clausius's mathematics, we can define the second law of thermodynamics as "The entropy of the Universe is constantly increasing to an eventual maximum." Because of his mathematics, Clausius is usually considered the discoverer of the second law, though this undervalues the work of Carnot and of Thomson.

WE'RE THE STAR THAT INSPIRED THE VERSE "TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE STAR."
YEAH? WELL WE'RE THE STAR THAT INSPIRED THE SONG: "WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR"

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Our final tale is a bit of down-home science fiction by Marc Laidlaw. Marc is a former Oregonian, so he understands how essential water is to the Pacific Northwest. The excessive dryness isn't the most horrible thing about this story. Neither is the dehydrated dog introduced in the first paragraph. No. The most horrible thing is Gasoline Lake itself . . .

GASOLINE LAKE

By Marc Laidlaw

THE DACHSHUND LOOKED like a slab of ancient beef jerky, dabbed with glue and rolled in lint. It teetered on three stumpy little legs that had dried in unnatural positions while the fourth had cracked clean off, leaving a bit of slightly ragged hem, dog fringe. Though there didn't seem to be much need for a flea collar, one hung around the petrified neck like a reminder of better days for dog and fleas alike. The eyes were dusty raisins. There was no way to examine the mouth without broken jaw bits ending up in either hand, but the muzzle was slightly parted, and the tongue could be seen to have receded all the way back into the dark cavity of the throat like a frightened snail. The dachshund felt warm to the touch, but that was from being left sitting in the sun. If you sniffed your fingers after stroking the hard brown flanks, you could still detect a faint, undeniable odor of dog.

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"This is Fritzy," said the Rehydrator.

Everybody stepped back from the display table at this announcement, as if it were obscene that something so dead should bear a name — and especially a name spoken with such obvious fondness.

The people of Gasoline Lake, Oregon, looked with renewed suspicion at the bulky truck and the man who had driven it into town in the heat of this December afternoon, when ordinary folk were just rising from a daylong sleep in cool bunkers. They had heard of Rehydrators, but never seen one. What he wanted here was anybody's guess. The tall, gaunt man wore a shiny new Mylar hat out from under which poked wispy strands of thin red hair. His nose was badly burned. He wore a robe of white fabric, blousy enough to hide all the pore-sucking pumps and reprocessing tubes he must be wearing beneath it. Most of the Gas Lake gawkers were hardly so modest, even in late afternoon; they wore their pisspores proudly, in plain sight, and, where not sucked at by the conservation suits, their skin was painted with sunban oils, or artificially blackened by melanin therapy. Facial features showed a mixed crowd of Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Rim. The Rehydrator scanned them as if they were a book he'd heard curious things about and immensely looked forward to reading.

"Fritzy was born in Gasoline Lake," he said. "If you check his tags, you'll see they were issued right here about twenty years ago. Expired by now, I guess. I'm just bringing him home, folks. Bringing him home."

"I'll give you fifty bucks for it," said Earl Taws, owner of the Miscellany Market, whose display window was crowded with deflated soccer balls, purses of cracked pink plastic, faded Hello Kitties, unstrung squash rackets, and other dusty, sun-bleached objects. "It'll go good with my new wooden Indian," he said, at which there was general laughter.

"That's a generous offer, sir," the Rehydrator said, "but I'm afraid this dog is not for sale. It's a gift. A gift to your town's benefactor, Galvin Orlick himself."

"Galvin Orlick?" The name went up from every mouth.

"Fritzy here was Mr. Orlick's dog. I'm returning him to his rightful owner."

"Galvin Orlick's been deader than that dog of his for twenty years, mister."

"Dead, you say?" the Rehydrator asked, with a broad wink at all of them. "What makes you think that Fritzy's dead?"

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"Well, shit," said Marlys Runyon, giving the dachshund a sound whack with the back of her hand. "How *did* I get that idea?"

Everyone laughed, and Marlys squinted at the Rehydrator with an ironic grin, the end of a long string of baccorish clenched in her brown, steadily chewing teeth.

The Rehydrator laughed right along with all the rest. "And Galvin Orlick is dead, you say? Now, how did that happen?"

"Just like his dog here," Marlys said. "He dried out."

"That's what I thought you'd say, and to that, I have this answer: what's been *de*hydrated can be *re*hydrated. I have no doubt that was Mr. Orlick's original intention — both in his case and in Fritzy's here."

"You saying this dog ain't dead?" said Earl Taws.

"I'm not saying a thing I can't prove. And a demonstration is worth any amount of talk."

"Don't go ruining that dog by getting it all soggy. My offer still stands — fifty dollars for the beast, as is. Can't promise to take it off your hands if you wreck it up."

"The dog's not for you, sir, and I intend him to be in proper shape for presentation to his rightful owner. Now, please, everyone, stand back."

"You saying you plan to revive old Orlick?" said Marlys, coming closer.

"Please, ma'am, you must stand back."

The Rehydrator fit a mask of shiny white plastic fiber over his face; his eyes bulged out of clear goggles. He reached under the display table and brought up a black valise and a big plastic tub. When he opened the case, rows of clear vials with black caps clinked inside it.

"Now, I'm going to need some water."

The crowd took on a menacing demeanor, none meaner than Norris Culp, C.P.A., who took it upon himself to speak for the others. "If this is what you've been leading up to, you charlatan, you'll end up wishing you had that dog for a pillow tonight in the city jail!"

"No need to threaten me, Sheriff, if that's what you are. Just talking to myself." As he climbed a short flight of folding steps and pushed through a canvas flap into his truck, several watchers laughed at Norris; one said, "Howdy, Sheriff."

The Rehydrator reappeared with a plastic jug full of pure blue water, five gallons of it, cradled in his arms. All through the crowd, dry tongues darted like lizards over lips parched and cracked as alkali flats. Eager

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fingers snatched at plastic tubes and sucked at the hot, stale, recirculated water till their pisspores were half-empty, but it didn't satisfy. The water in that jug looked fresh and cool as if it had just been hauled sweating from a deep spring.

"Yuh're not gonna waste that on a dog, are yuh?"

"No more than necessary, citizen; fear not."

"You — you better be careful," said Norris, showing the other face of the law now. "That's an open invitation to thieves."

"Thieves, Sheriff? In Gasoline Lake? You all seem law-abiding citizens to me."

He set Fritzy gently in the plastic tub, then delicately upended the jug and shook it like a vinegar bottle, sprinkling the corpse with what seemed an endless shower of clean water. To the citizens of Gasoline Lake, it looked like enough water to bring back the forests and crops that were only photographic memories to most of them; water enough for bathing and swimming and for sheer luxurious waste — which is what the Rehydrator seemed to be doing. Wasting water on a dead dog!

But when he set the jug down, they saw that he'd used hardly any. Thirst had deluded them yet again.

The dog now sparkled with bright drops of water like so many little lenses stuck in the tufted hair. Not many Gas Lakers would have missed the chance to suck that water from poor old Fritzy's hide if the Rehydrator had turned his back. But he didn't give them a chance. Taking two vials from his valise, he emptied them simultaneously into the tub, letting the streams mingle in midfall. White, reeking fumes volcanoed toward the unblinking sun. The Rehydrator pulled on a pair of thick black gloves and bent headlong into the chemical steam, busying himself over Fritzy. When the clouds dissipated, they saw him massaging the beast, working the stinking potion into flesh and fur, palpating the creature's gummy eyelids, bathing its stump, forcing his fingers down its throat and working elasticity into the suddenly lolling pink tongue. Apart from the mask, he resembled nothing so much as an ordinary man bathing a dog — a felony performed only rarely in the past three decades, and always in great privacy; a once-familiar sight that now held the audience so enrapt that he might have been building ziggurats single-handed or demonstrating practical levitation, like any other fakir.

And strangest of all, Fritzy, like any ordinary dog, was soon shivering

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and whining at the water's touch, licking his thin black lips, his shiny brown eyes bulging in a pantomine of terror, as if he were being flayed for the oven rather than simply returning to a semblance of lively, clean-smelling dog — a dog none would mind petting till he'd taken his first good roll in the carcass of a worm-eaten crow.

The crowd broke into gasps of amazement, then into applause. This was too much excitement for Fritzy. He broke from his groomer, jumped out of the tub and straight into the dust of the roadside, where he rubbed his muzzle in the dirt, dog tags jangling, and rolled and wriggled on his back in the road with three legs kicking air and the one stump twitching as if it would have liked to join them. Then he jumped to his feet and shook wildly, spattering the nearest gawkers with mud and grit and some of that stinging spray that had accomplished the act of revivification.

Norris Culp looked into the smoking tub, then quickly poked under the display table to see where the counterfeit wooden dog had gone. The Rehydrator grinned and bowed like a magician. He let Fritzy scamper through the crowd, and finally called him over and fed him a bone-dry biscuit, watching the faces soften toward him as the first few folks came sidling up to ask how it was done. He shook his head — "Trade secret" —and then their hands, politely declining offers of dinner, noting the way they looked at that nearly full bottle of pure blue water. There was a great deal of excitement in the crowd, but it didn't distract him. He was the only one, in fact, who noticed when Marlys Runyon — whose name he had yet to learn — took off running.

COREY ORLICK, nearly eighteen years old, stood in the spreading shade of a big plastic oak and peed thoughtfully on his Uncle Galvin's grave. When he was finished, he wiped his eyes, sucked a tear from the back of his hand, and shook out a few more drops, careful to direct them into the spreading golden funnel at the foot of the plot. On the headstone, under the engraved legend HERE NAPS GALVIN OSPREY ORLICK, a digital readout showed the year's accumulated moisture, plotted against a slowly shifting curve indicating how much precipitation was still needed over a goodly span of years before old Galvin might conceivably consider ending his well-deserved "nap." In the afternoon glare, Corey could hardly read the figure, but he knew it was still too low to matter. He'd tacked on only a few more cc's, but his

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pisspores felt dangerously light and low, rustling against his skin.

His incautious pissing was a futile gesture, a waste of precious reserves, but he couldn't help himself. He'd been coming out here twice a week for a year now, praying for his uncle's revival, praying old Galvin might rise up and see the things being done in his name — and with his money. Corey made up for all his wasteful, wishful pissing by digging evaporation pits in his yard and throwing in stray bits of garbage he sneaked from his job at The Succulent Steak; letting the sun suck all moisture from the scraps to condense on the plastic covers, where he lapped it up like rubbishy dew each evening when he rose. But since last week, when Mr. Bell had caught the dish-wiper with her pockets full of cactus peels, Corey had cut back on his thieving, which meant cutting back on his grave-watering as well.

"Oh Uncle," he moaned. "If only you'd wake up. By the time the rains come, there won't be a thing of yours left!"

A woodpecker rapped sharply at the trunk above his head, making the whole tree reverberate with a hollow sound. Clouds of dust sifted over him. Nature seemed intent on bringing down the plastic tree, so tall and green and out of place among the sere and barren hills. The oak was artificial, but the cool shade beneath it was real enough. This was the only place in Gas Lake where Corey felt anything like comfortable these days.

At that moment he heard footsteps scuffing past on the road below the hill. Ducking behind the tree, he spied Marlys Runyon running past with a tight, anxious expression, frantically slurping up her tobacco rope as if it were a strand of limp yucca spaghetti. Her look suggested that some plan of hers had gone awry, which made his heart gladden. He watched till she disappeared, then he crept down the far side of the hill and made his way through the stumps and ashes toward town.

Marlys cursed when she saw the last few inches of baccorish come twisting out of her pocket, crawling steadily toward her mouth. Where would she get the money for another?

She thought of Medford Bannister, and laughed at herself. To think she'd been planning to give her news away!

At the edge of the dunes, she cut left, avoiding on one side the sand that burned her bare feet and, on the other, fields full of fire thistle. Between the two regions were a tough mat of grabgrass, almost cool, the

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best place to walk. She hurried along till she saw Medford's gleaming roof, then cut across the dunes as fast as she could.

The house was half-buried after a day of wind; every few hours a powerful blower evacuated clouds of sand. If Medford ever neglected this task, or if the blower broke down, the house would be buried inside a day and might never surface again. Medford could have lived in town, safe behind the grabgrass barriers, but that would have exposed him to busybodies.

Marlys's feet blistered before she reached the shade of the porch. Medford opened the door the instant she arrived, alerted to her approach by his alarm system. She rushed in and leaped into a chair, raising her feet and screaming, "Ice!" Before she finished the word, Medford was already pressing a huge lump of it against her soles, letting the precious stuff run between her toes and his fingers, dribbling onto the floor.

"You're so reckless!" she said. *So rich,* she meant. Her sighs were ecstatic. The lump quickly melted away for no purpose except to numb her; just as it vanished, he stroked the last sliver down her calves, her inner thighs, making her slippery. She twisted, and he stumbled aside, grinning with frustration.

"I didn't come out here for that," she said.

"Couldn't help noticing you're just about out of rope. Only natural to think —"

"I'd sell myself for a twist of tobacco? You're slimier than you look, Med."

He backed away sheepishly, pulling the gold wire bands of his spectacles back over his ears. "Marlys, you know I don't think of you that way. I can buy all the sex I need, but I *love* you."

"Anyway, I have something else to sell."

He looked suddenly crafty. "How much?"

"Don't you want to know what it is first?"

"You're not carrying anything, so it must be information. I know you won't tell me what you've got until I pay. So I ask you again, what's your price?"

The phone rang. Medford's grin widened.

"Don't answer that!"

"Your info just depreciated, that it?"

"If you answer, I won't tell you a thing."

"Needn't worry yourself, hon; you're overexcited. Of course I won't

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answer if you don't like it. Now . . . how much?"

She waited till the phone stopped ringing. Satisfied that he'd buy the news from her, she answered, "A coil."

"That all? Hold on a sec." He backed into the house, though he usually carried more than enough cash on his person. If he really loved her, he should have given it to her outright as a gift. But she'd made it clear a few times that she didn't like accepting gifts from him. So she sold him the things he could have for free, and gave for free what others had to pay for. He'd received a whole collection of her dried-out horny toads, gratis.

He walked back in the room a few minutes later, empty-handed, looking smug.

"Well?" she said.

"Just checked my messages. Hear there's a Rehydrator in town."

"Shit!" She jumped from the chair, staring toward him. "You cheap —"

He slapped a thick brown coil into the hand that was reaching for his throat. "A deal's a deal, Marlys. I was saving this last one for you anyway."

"Why, thank you, Medford. What a gentleman."

She kissed him, spat out her last inch of rope, nipped the end of the new one between her teeth, and unreeled several feet of it till the thick bulk fit in her pocket. The first chew on a fresh rope was heavenly. She sat down to suck on it while Medford picked up the piece she'd spat, and wiped the spot with his handkerchief before throwing both into the kitchen recycler.

"You still want to hear it?" she said.

"I told you, I got a call. Rehydrator's come around saying he's going to rejuvenate Galvin Orlick, and apparently he proved it with a dead dog."

"And that doesn't worry you?"

Medford shrugged. "I've seen these stunts before."

"Medford, I was there. The guy's no faker. That dog was like an old sanded-down floorboard till he doused it. Next thing you know, it was running in circles, pissing on stumps."

"It's an old trick, Marlys, no reflection on you for falling for it. They're confidence men, all these Rehydrators. Just like the Rain Men."

"But the process works. I've done it myself."

"You've dried things out, Marlys, but have you made them live again?"

She shook her head. "Well, no. I never learned that part."

"Exactly. You nor anyone else. That's the essence of the scam. Galvin

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may have believed the lungfish process worked, and the people who fall for rehydrators may believe it, but we know better."

"You don't think he knows, do you? It's a weird coincidence, him coming around right now."

"No, how could he?"

"Still, we should be careful. I'd like to check him out."

"Be my guest. But I'm sure this piker will take off as soon as he sees there're already sharks in our pond."

"Meaning you and me?"

Medford opened the icebox for another cube and came at her with it melting and pooling in the palm of his outstretched hand. "Honey, at worst it might require a little orchestration. That guy'll be gone before this cube gets done melting."

"I'm not letting you waste another one," Marlys said, and, leaning forward, she took it between her teeth, holding it there until her mouth was full of ice water and the searing pain exquisite.

In the first slow easing of the day's heat, as the streets of Gasoline Lake filled with people starting to go about their business in the dusk, the Rehydrator saw three figures coming toward him down the dusty road, looking less impressive than their long eastward shadows. The one he'd called "Sheriff" was among them, though he hadn't believed for a minute that the man really was any such thing. In fact, the obvious sheriff was first of the three, her polished star glinting orange in the late-evening light.

Fritzy ran out and barked at them as they approached the truck. The Rehydrator sat down on the steps. "Settle down, Fritzy. These look like friends."

He spoke loudly, hoping this was true.

"You're the Rehydrator?" the sheriff asked. She was a tall, sunbaked woman with frazzled yellow hair. She wore a light beige blousy uniform over her pisspores, and carried a sleek gun in a breakaway holster. Ammo darts were lined up along her belt.

"That's right." He put out his hand. "Hope I'm not breaking any ordinances parking out here. I plan to come into the Town Hall and apply for whatever permits I'll need just as soon as it's open."

"It's open now," said Culp, the man who'd accused him of being a

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charlatan. "There's a fifty-dollar fine if you don't —"

"Settle down, Norris; I'll take care of this," the sheriff said. "We used to be concerned about open fires around here, but you can see there's nothing left to burn these days. Just don't flick matches out at Gasoline Lake. Since you're not harming anybody, and you seem to have something to offer the town, we'll just treat you like any other visitor." She glowered at the clerk. "With courtesy."

"I am a visitor," the Rehydrator said.

"I heard you have something a bit more complicated in mind. Something to do with Galvin Orlick."

"I came to see about reviving him."

The sheriff didn't speak for a moment. She seemed to be judging him from what she could see.

"A lot of people think he can't be revived," she said at last.

He scooped up Fritzy. "I revived Orlick's dog."

"How did you say you got ahold of that pup? Galvin's buried in a sealed vault. If it was interred with him. . . ."

"I understand his body is checked periodically — that he has custodians."

"He does," said Norris Culp indignantly, "and I'm sure they would have noticed if his dog went missing."

The sheriff nodded. "His tomb — and his estate — are overseen by the Bannister office. Gas Lake's oldest law firm."

"A town this size has more than one?"

"That's a prerequisite, son," said a short, plump, graying man, stepping forward to shake the Rehydrator's hand. "In a grievance, one firm can hardly represent both parties. I represent the other. Lawrence Wing, Esq. I hope if you have any trouble with Norris here or the Town Hall folks, you'll call on me."

His hand was soft and dry, but in the gloom the Rehydrator couldn't read his eyes.

"Is it possible the dachshund never was in the tomb with Galvin?" Wing asked.

The Rehydrator shrugged. "Could be."

"We still have a problem," the sheriff said. "Galvin Orlick didn't want to be revived until the drought had ended. We're thirty hard years into this one, and it could last another seventy, eighty more — might never

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end, really. From what I've heard, Galvin couldn't stand even ten years — and they were damp by comparison to these last. What makes you think he'd appreciate being revived, even if you could do it?"

"He's dead," Culp said flatly. "Not just dried-out — dead."

"Bullshit," Wing snapped.

"Only a lawyer like you could twist things around to make it seem otherwise."

"Only a lawyer like Med Bannister could confuse the issue in the first place!"

"You see the basic problem," the sheriff said, separating Wing and Culp.

"I apologize," Wing said to the Rehydrator. "There's a touchy question of whether, in his present condition, Orlick can be considered alive or not. And if not, there's the question of what should be done with his estate —liquid and financial."

"Well, if I were to revive him, he could settle the matter himself, don't you think?"

"He's dead!" Culp said. "And only you, Wing, would defend him."

"Well, I have to admit that's apparently true," Wing said to the Rehydrator. "You might say I've been defending Galvin in the public interest ever since his existence first came into question. *Pro bono*, I might add, since I have no access to the Orlick trust — unlike Bannister, who was the first to think up the tricky question."

"Bannister," said the Rehydrator, recognizing the name. "Orlick's custodian?"

"Damn right. Medford Bannister, Jr. He's been living off the estate for years, sucking it dry, if you ask me, in the process of questioning his benefactor's existence."

"You take a one-sided view of these things," Culp said irritably.

"Perhaps, Norris. But unlike Galvin's so-called custodian, I stand to profit nothing from my perspective except a small moral victory, perhaps the pleasure of partaking in a precedent. Don't forget that I knew Galvin."

"I could solve your problem with a quick procedure," the Rehydrator said.

"It sure would be a lot faster than working it out in the courts," said the sheriff, the last bit of sunlight twinkling in her eyes.

"Sheriff!" Culp exclaimed. "You can't mean you condone this!"

"I'm impartial, Norris. I'm also curious." She petted Fritzy's snout,

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letting the dog lick her fingers. "You say he was dried stiff this afternoon?"

"Everyone who saw it will vouch for me," said the Rehydrator.

"Not everyone," Culp said. "I'm convinced it was a sleight of some kind. I've seen other magicians who could do as much."

"Sleight of hand would have failed miserably in Fritzy's case," said the Rehydrator. "I can demonstrate my process again with any preserved specimen you care to contribute."

"No kidding?" said the sheriff. "I've got this little dried horny toad. If I brought it around, could you . . . you know?"

"I'd be delighted to revive it, providing it hasn't been pickled or stuffed."

"No, Marlys Runyon gave it to me as a gift when I first came to Gasoline Lake. She did it herself. She runs a small-time trade in them — sort of a front for her other work. Lots of men in town collect her horny toads."

The Rehydrator made a sweeping bow. "Anytime. Until I get my bearings, I'll be right here."

The sheriff beamed at him. "Well, that's all. Don't mean to seem suspicious of strangers, but I had a few requests to check you out, and I can't deny the citizens their peace of mind."

"I understand. Thanks for the welcome."

"Good night, now. I'll be back with my horny toad tomorrow."

"Good night to you," said Lawrence Wing, taking the Rehydrator's hand again.

Norris Culp strode down the road without a word, turning on his heel once to wait till the sheriff followed.

The Rehydrator watched them go, then sat and waited for his next visitor to get up the courage to come forward. He'd seen someone lurking about in the shadows of the burned woods. Finally, as expected, a skinny young man crept forward. The Rehydrator felt a puzzling sympathy for the fellow even before he spoke.

"M-Mister?" the boy said. "I-I missed your show today, but I heard about it later. I heard what you came for, and it worried me. You're asking for trouble. I thought I better warn you what's really going on around here."

"I appreciate that, son. Would you like some water?"

"Yes, sir!"

The Rehydrator reached back inside the truck for a jug and a cup.

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When he offered the cup, the boy sipped slowly, sighing and smacking his lips after each little sip.

"This is delicious. Thank you, mister."

"Not at all. Now, why don't you have a seat and tell me your name."

"I'm Corey. Corey Orlick. Galvin was my uncle — my father's brother. My dad died last year. Now I'm the last living Orlick in Gas Lake."

The Rehydrator sighed and sank down beside the boy, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Is that right? Exactly what kind of trouble am I asking for?"

COREY WORKED all night at The Succulent Steak, trimming needles off the big green arms, slicing them into inch-thick slabs, juicing aloes. Tonight he could hardly concentrate on his work. By the time his shift ended, it was nearly light. He took off along the road out of town and found the Rehydrator's truck parked where he'd left it. Fritzy yapped softly as he rapped on the side. A moment later the Rehydrator poked his head out through the canvas flap, blinking sleep from his eyes.

"Ready?" Corey asked.

"I'm not on your schedule," he said, stumbling out to sit on the steps and pull on his sandals. He strolled yawning to the edge of the campsite, facing away from Corey, taking a somehow formal stance toward the rising sun. At first Corey thought it was some religious thing, but then he heard a drizzling sound and realized that the Rehydrator was pissing.

"What're you doing?" he cried, grabbing the cup he'd drunk from the previous night, nearly knocking over the Rehydrator in his haste to catch the stream. The man jumped back, as surprised as Corey, pulling his thin robe shut. Corey saw in that instant that the Rehydrator wasn't wearing pisspores at all under the robe; his sweat was free to evaporate into thin air without recapture, wasted in the same way as his urine.

They stared at each other in embarrassed confusion for a minute, Corey holding the empty cup, until the Rehydrator grinned and took it from him.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess that is wasteful."

"Hell, you were going right in the dust, mister. Nothing can grow there. I mean, if you have to waste it, wait'll we get to Uncle Orlick's grave. I sometimes do it there."

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He didn't think it would be polite to say anything about the man's missing pisspores. Such open wastefulness was bad enough.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," the Rehydrator said. "I'm a bit profligate with the water, I guess. It's just that my truck's full of it."

"Full?" Corey looked at the vehicle, never having guessed that so much could be kept in one place. He hadn't looked inside. "But — but you must be rich. What're you doing traveling around like a . . . ."

"Like a bum, rich enough to waste water? You're making me feel immoral, Corey. I'll have to mend my ways, with your help. First, though, let's see your uncle's grave."

They put Fritzy in the truck and set off walking through the sere, stump-ridden hills. The land around the town was mainly free of sand, thanks to the driftwalls and acres of matted grabgrass that surrounded it. Corey took a shortcut through a cactus orchard, keeping well away from the poisonous black spines that bounced around them as the heavy green arms bobbed in a hot, sterile wind. The moment the sun broke free of the horizon, the wind filled with sand, dust, and thistles. They bent forward into it, Corey covering his face with the dust veil clipped to his collar, the Rehydrator pulling on his white mask of plastic mesh. The sky was orange as a needle held in a flame, and growing whiter every minute. The Rehydrator lagged behind, stumbling and coughing even though the wind died down slightly. Finally he came to a complete stop, crouching with his head between his knees.

"You bring any water?" Corey asked.

The man shook his head.

"That's stu — not too smart. You better have some of mine." He unclipped the tube from his pisspores, happy to see that the suit had inflated after last night's deep drink. The Rehydrator took the tube between his lips, sipped, and pushed it away with a gagging sound. "What — what's wrong with it?" he choked.

Corey sipped experimentally. "Tastes fine to me. You be all right?"

"How much farther?"

"About a half mile, I guess."

The Rehydrator got to his feet, readjusted his Mylar cap, and peered down the trail — such as it was. "Is that water up ahead?"

Corey laughed. "That's the lake."

"It is! It's a lake!"

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The Rehydrator's enthusiasm boosted him forward. The lake was clear near its edges, almost the same shade of white as the sky, but it darkened toward the depths, and in the center was a deep orange color, like liquid rust. It seemed to waver vaporously in the heat, causing the dunes on the far shore to ripple and shimmer. Corey stopped on the beach, well back from the little dust-speckled mercury wavelets the wind stirred up, but the Rehydrator rushed ahead, taking long strides.

Corey screamed at him. He was going in!

He caught the man from behind and hauled him back, upsetting both of them so they landed in a tumble on the cracked banks.

"What's wrong?" the Rehydrator asked. "I was just going to cool my feet."

"There's a good reason they call it Gas Lake, mister — though it's not gasoline exactly. Used to be a factory over the hill — same old plant that made the Orlick fortune. They dumped stuff here, some kind of toxic liquid. If it were water, it would've evaporated years ago, but it doesn't. It just sits there shimmering. My dad told me it's a vapor with high surface tension — not even the wind can disperse it. You can't smell fumes unless you're right on the surface — which is good, because it's supposed to be pretty flammable."

"My God," the Rehydrator said, shaking his head in confusion. "I almost walked into it. I'm going to listen to you more carefully from now on, Corey."

"I'm surprised you've gotten along without me this long, mister. No pisspores, wasting your pee. Living with all that water has made you careless."

The Rehydrator didn't seem to hear him. His tongue looked white and swollen, his eyes glazed over.

"Oh no," Corey said. "Get up, can you? Come on, lean on me. It's not far."

They stumbled along the edge of the lake, then cut back into the hills. Ahead Corey saw the reassuring branches of the big plastic oak, offering little at this hour but the promise of shade to come. He practically had to drag the Rehydrator up the hill and sit him on the western side of the trunk, the coolest spot. He shoved his tube back in the man's mouth, this time to no complaint. He felt his pisspores deflating as the Rehydrator sucked and sucked.

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"O.K., that's enough." Corey pushed him away. "You're gonna owe me a refill when we get back to your truck."

The Rehydrator mumbled his assent. Corey crouched and watched him, wondering at the tenderness of his pale skin, as if he had spent more time than was natural inside that truck of his and never built up a tan. Even living mainly at night, it was impossible for most people to avoid getting baked and burned by the sun. Water must have allowed this man some incredible luxuries.

Suddenly Corey heard voices and footsteps coming up the road past the hill. He crouched down behind his uncle's gravestone as Marlys Runyon and Medford Bannister came into sight.

"Where'd they go?" Medford said.

"Keep your voice down," Marlys scolded. "They're probably at the gate."

Corey tapped the Rehydrator till his blurry eyes opened, and put a finger to his lips for silence. "Can you move yet?"

"I'll try," the man whispered.

Corey led him over the crown of the hill, through thickets of sage and artemisia, between waving stalks of parched mullein, avoiding a cactus patch whose location he'd learned from painful experience. They finally came out at a point where the trail ended at a shorn-off side of the hill. Marlys and Medford had just reached an equivalent point on the road below.

"See?" Medford said. "No sign of them."

At that moment the Rehydrator stumbled on the crumbly earth, falling into drought scrub that crackled like applause. Corey swore and forced himself to stand up.

"What're you doing here?" he demanded, trying to take the offensive.

"I should ask you the same thing," Bannister said.

"He's trying to break into the tomb," Marlys said. "It's obvious."

"I have every right to be here," Corey said.

"And I as well," said Bannister. "In fact, I was just coming out to perform my custodial service."

"What a coincidence," said Corey. "Then we can all check together to make sure that Uncle Galvin's O.K."

"Lucky timing," said the Rehydrator, finally getting to his feet.

"What's he doing here?" Marlys said.

"I asked him along," Corey said. "He's gonna prove my uncle's alive

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— prove it once and for all."

Medford scowled. "I'm not empowered to allow strangers in the vault."

"You were bringing in Marlys," Corey said. "I can bring my friend in if I want." He grabbed the Rehydrator's elbow. "Come on; it's tricky footing."

They made their way down carefully to level ground.

"Don't be stupid, Corey," Marlys said when he was near her. "That guy's a stage magician — he's using you."

"You know all about using people, don't you?" Corey said.

"Why, you little—"

Medford took hold of her arm, twisting it slightly. "Now, now."

She wrenched herself away from him, furious.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," Medford said. "I'm—"

"That's Medford Bannister, the one I told you about," Corey said. "He's a snake, and Marlys Runyon — she's something worse."

"I know you have a poor opinion of me, Corey," the lawyer said. "But you're going to have to grow up and see how the world works. You can't blame me for your uncle's oversight in not providing for you. I know you feel slighted, but—"

"Who cares what he thinks?" Marlys said. She walked up to the side of the hill and gave it a hard kick. The metal door made a booming sound.

"That's right," Corey said. "It doesn't matter. But you'd better open that door and show me my uncle."

Medford smiled and took a magnetic key from his robes. he pressed it against the lock panel, twisted, and, with a whirring sound, the gate swung inward. A breath of air cool as midnight wafted out of a corridor big enough for all of them to walk abreast. Sunken lights switched on as they entered, and a soft pinging sound followed them down a ramp, like an alarm signaling their presence to the sleeper within.

The casket sat in the center of a round, domed chamber. Corey hadn't been here since he was a boy, but there wasn't much to forget. Four square pillars stood at the points of the compass around the casket, each bearing various indicators and controls. The container itself was tear-shaped, with a curved, mirror-silver lid that warped their reflections as they passed between the columns. As Corey reached out to touch the surface, he saw greasy streaks disturbing the pristine silver, the stains of hands, and something in his heart clenched up.

"Open it," he said.

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"There's no call for that," Bannister said.

"Open it, I said! Someone's been here!"

Bannister pursed his lips, adjusted his spectacles, then bowed slightly in acquiescence. He worked some combination of controls on each of the pillars, and a hissing sound emanated from the casket. Slowly, the lid lifted. Corey stared into the receptacle in disbelief, although his suspicions had been confirmed.

"He's gone," he whispered, an unnecessary but irresistable (and accurate) description of what everyone could plainly see.

"My God," said Medford Bannister.

"How about that," offered Marlys Runyon.

"That's what woke me," the Rehydrator mumbled, but Corey hardly heard him.

"What did you do with my uncle?" he screamed.

"Not a damn thing," Bannister said, his composure slipping, his forehead beaded with sweat. "I — I don't know how this could have happened. No one else has a key."

"Someone could have made one — if you didn't do it."

"Calm down, Corey," the Rehydrator said. "Maybe he's around here someplace."

"If he's anywhere, he's in Bannister's safe."

"My God, what would I stand to profit from absconding with my own client? This only complicates things."

"Oh yeah? As much as if you'd left him here for the Rehydrator to revive? You'd do anything to avoid that. And now you have."

Corey spun away from them, plunging toward the disk of daylight at the end of the tunnel. The Rehydrator called his name, but Corey kept going. He had to find his uncle's body, even if it was an impossible task; he couldn't rest until he'd convinced himself it was impossible. Galvin might be anywhere — in someone's cellar, buried in the dunes, tossed in the ocean or the lake . . . anywhere!

He knew he wasn't being rational, heading off on a search by himself, but he couldn't stop now. He had to do something.

Outside, blinded, he nearly plowed into a saguaro cactus. He would call Larry Wing, his dad's old friend. Larry was always offering his help.

As he remembered the Rehydrator, he felt bad for a moment. How

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Then the sun hit him like a hammer, knocking him flat in the middle of the road.

could he leave someone so vulnerable at the mercy of Medford Bannister and Marlys Runyon?

Well, it was a tough place, Gas Lake. The guy would just have to fend for himself.

"That's what woke me. . . ." Now, what the hell did that mean?

Marlys turned away from the tunnel where Corey had vanished, and glared at the Rehydrator. "Look at you standing there, watching everything. You're the cause of all this, I hope you know."

"Now, Marlys, calm down," Bannister counseled.

"What's he doing here anyway?"

"I don't believe I have anything to contribute at the moment," the Rehydrator said. "Not with the body gone. I suppose you should tell the sheriff."

"Lorna?" she laughed. "She couldn't find dust on Earl Taws's shelves."

"He's right, though," Medford said. "We have to report this."

"Maybe if I had a description, I could help look for him," the Rehydrator said.

Marlys's laughter echoed in the close chamber. "He looked like that old dog of yours before you soaked it. But with one less leg."

"Come on," Bannister said. "We'll leave everything as it is."

They filed out of the chamber. The Rehydrator lingered at the threshold, reluctant to reenter the blazing world that looked even hotter now than it had when they went underground. But he trudged along behind them toward town, letting them pull ahead, too hot to keep pace. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, his nose began to run. When he wiped it, a streak of blood gleamed on the back of his hand.

Dizzy. The other two looked far away. He called out weakly, his nose now so full of blood that he felt he was drowning in it. Marlys glanced back briefly, and must have seen him with blood running down his face, but she only smiled and slipped her arm through Bannister's, and moved off even faster.

Help, he whispered.

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Then the sun hit him like a hammer, knocking him flat in the middle of the road.

He dreamed he was back in the cool, dark chamber — not in Orlick's chamber, but in his own. It was a long dream, a dry dream, a drought dream — but at the end of it was water, glorious, burning water, filling his cells, pouring in his face, till he woke up swimming in it.

He woke in the dream only, reliving his memories of waking in the cool, secret vault that was the twin of Galvin Orlick's. He remembered the dark cell, the lights coming on slowly around him, the lid rising as he sat up in a pool of foaming, vaporous liquid like a man who'd fallen asleep in his bath and slept for twenty years.

Thirst had been his initial sensation. Thirst and a maddening confusion — amnesia. He had found a huge cache of water jugs and drank till he was sick, but he didn't find memories. In an adjacent chamber, he found the truck, and wondered at its purpose. He found messages that had been left for him to read when he awoke — notes reminding him of an obligation he must fulfill in exchange for his long, cool sleep. Obligations to a man named Galvin Orlick. The name meant nothing to him.

"*If you're awake, there are only a few reasons why,*" read one message written in glowing letters that scrolled across a little screen at the foot of the vacuum-sealed bed where he had slept:

> *The first possibility is that the drought has ended, in which case you are under no obligation to me. Go your way in the new green world. Another possibility is that my rest has been prematurely disturbed. In this case, you must investigate my current condition, awakening me if necessary, according to the instructions and chemicals you will find in the truck. It is also possible that you will be awakened if my financial conditions erode below a certain level, in which case I must ask you to check on my affairs, again reviving me if necessary to put them in order. Do not attempt to resolve them yourself. I am certain you will not shirk these small duties, remembering the weight of your obligations to me, the vows you swore, and the anxiety with which you took your leave from present affairs. Trusting you, I am — Galvin O. Orlick.*

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Examining various instruments in the chamber, he discovered that the drought showed no sign of ending. He learned that he had slept for twenty years. Maps showed him his present location, and that of Galvin Orlick. He carefully read the instructions for practicing revival on Fritzy, who slept in a tinier version of the tear-shaped casket, but he decided to delay this experiment until he might get the most from it. He also found a gun.

Many more things were left unclear, however, his name but one of them. He could not uncover the cause of his "obligation." Apparently it had been squeezed from his brain along with the original waters, and had not returned when his cells were drenched afresh.

Why not simply walk away from his obligation? What could he possibly owe a man he had not seen in twenty years?

The answer lay in his realization that after twenty years he would be utterly alone in the world — alone except for that other. If he did revive Orlick, then he might learn his identity and the nature of the debt he had awoken to discharge. Ultimately that was what drove him out into the hot, dry world. What other purpose did his life have except the one hinted at in all these notes?

He had loaded the truck with water, leaving most of it untouched in the cache. Then he had opened a secret gate into a sere, weedy wilderness, and driven up into it. The truck was solar-powered, and there was no dearth of sunlight to drive it. That first day the heat had nearly killed him. He left the chamber just after dawn, and within a few hours, he had stopped a dozen times to drink and cool down. Even the shade was like an oven. The glint of heatlight on the glass dazzled and dizzied him. Finally he had passed out in the driver's seat, crashing the truck into a clump of brush. That was when he fell on Fritzy and broke off the dachshund's leg. He had lain there in a faint until sunset, dreaming feverishly on his cool bedchamber, dark dreams, dreaming almost of the lifetime twenty years behind him. . . .

And now these dreams abandoned him again, and he rose once more in a dark place to the touch of water. A cool cloth rough as a cat's tongue licked his brow.

He opened his eyes and saw the sheriff bending over him. She smiled. "That better?"

"Where am I?"

"My office."

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"It's — it's so cool."

"Rank has privileges."

She stopped stroking him. He realized she had laid wet pads all over his face. He peeled one off and found that it was green and oozy, a strip of succulent.

"Borrowed these from the steak house next door," she said.

"I fainted."

"In the road. Good thing I went back to check on Orlick's grave. You were breathing dust. Another hour out there, and you'd have been a crispy critter. Dehydration would have killed you."

"Thank you," he said. He touched one of the steaks to his tongue and sucked on it, drinking the green juices. It tasted salty from his skin.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" she asked, sitting down in a spring-backed chair. Her metal desk was covered with plastic printouts and carved wooden animals — antiques.

He sat up and found that he'd been sprawled on a couch. "Sure," he said.

"Why don't you have a pair of pisspores on? We checked your truck and didn't find any — oh, I gave Fritzy some water while we were there. Did someone steal 'em while you were lying in the road?"

He swung slowly forward. "No, Sheriff. You won't find any. I didn't have any to steal."

"That looks pretty suspicious, you know. I also got a look at how much water you carry. That's a dangerous load, you realize, don't you? Most people would build a fortress around a supply like that. I found a gun, too. Not a dart gun, but the real old type, using gunpowder and bullets — the kind that strike sparks and've been illegal for years because of it."

"You must have looked pretty carefully."

"Fritzy seemed hungry. I gave him some kibble. Didn't recognize the brand, though. It claimed to have meat and grain in it — not just cactus products. By then I was almost ready for that."

He realized that he couldn't bear her suspicion. The secrets he'd been hiding weren't even his to hide — they belonged to a man he couldn't remember meeting. It looked as if that man might never be found. If Galvin disappeared or proved incapable of being revived, the Rehydrator would be alone in this place — an alien. It was time to start taking responsibility for his own destiny. He needed people. Needed friends.

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Corey was one, and maybe now the sheriff could be one as well — if he trusted her.

All right, he thought. I'm telling her.

"Sheriff," he said, "I don't have a pair of pisspores for a stranger reason than you'd ever think. There're plenty of other ways I'm not equipped or suited for this place — this drought."

"Exactly how have you been getting along, if you don't mind my asking?"

"The truth is, I haven't been getting along at all."

He told her everything.

Lawrence Wing, Esq., listened closely to Corey, punctuating the narrative with various noncommittal sounds. Even when Corey had finished and Wing started giving his advice, it was hard to tell what the lawyer personally thought and what he merely recommended in his professional capacity.

"You know, I've defended Galvin for nearly ten years now without any real input from your father, rest his soul, or you, Corey. Galvin never asked for my help, you know. He thought he'd get a better bargain from Bannister, and maybe he did, for a while. But that was Bannister Senior. If he'd looked twice at Junior, he might have worried a little bit. Medford never showed signs of following in his father's footsteps. He was a troublemaker, a lot like Marlys Runyon, though with plenty of family money to give him a gloss of respectability, and a good education to sharpen his cunning. Marlys never had those opportunities. She's crude but effective."

"I know. She used my father," Corey spat.

"I was aware something went on there, though the details — well, I never thought it was my business."

"After my mother died, he wasn't in his right mind—"

"Who would be?"

"— and she started coming around, pretending she wanted to help us out, saying we needed a woman's touch around the place, though the touch she had in mind was a different one. She was looking to see what access my dad had to Galvin's money. Soon as she realized Bannister held all the strings, she dumped him hard — even tried seducing me just to shame us both. It helped kill him, all that misery heaped so high."

Wing regarded him soberly, lips pursed. "I don't want to add to your

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own misery, Corey, but there may have been more going on there than you guessed. Marlys and Medford were partners since before you were born. She was probably on a fishing trip for Medford's sake when she tried to get close to your daddy, see if old Galvin had left any loose ends hid from his lawyer."

"You mean the whole time she was living with us, she was really working for Bannister?"

Wing nodded slowly. "Guess I knew more about that situation than I realized. I'm sorry we never talked before, Corey. I hope we'll keep in contact from now on."

Corey jumped to his feet. "Well, why even wonder who stole Uncle Galvin? It's obvious they did it! They snatched him away so he couldn't wake up — and now there's not even a body for you all to argue over whether it's alive or not. They'll take everything!"

Suddenly he'd had all he could take. He collapsed in a plush, overstuffed chair and sobbed into his open hands.

"There now, son. You're not helpless. I've been fighting them with the law all these years because that's my way, and because I felt I owed it to Galvin even if he was too proud and penny-pinching to ask for my help in the first place. See what it cost him in the end, that infamous thrift?"

"I — I can't pay anything either, sir."

"Don't be ridiculous, son. The point is, there's no way for me to move quickly on this one. I'm all mired down in law; it's the only swamp the drought couldn't touch. For every move I make, Medford sees me coming a mile off and has all the time he needs to plan a countermove. Meanwhile, he could ship that body out of here or burn it in a bonfire for all I know."

"Well . . . *I'm* not a lawyer. I'm not bogged down."

"Exactly why I'm telling you all this, in a cautious, advisory sort of way. Maybe there're things you can do that I can't even counsel you about, because if I did, I might be telling you things that go against my professional ethics — not that there aren't plenty of my peers who have no qualms about going out and doing such things themselves."

Corey leaned eagerly over the desk. "And you can't suggest anything? Anything at all? Are you sure?"

Wing yawned hugely. "My, my, look at the time. It'll be noon soon. I should be in bed."

"Please," Corey said.

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The lawyer winked. "I'll bet Bannister's in bed, too, and Marlys with him."

"But I can't get near his place. It's booby-trapped."

"And you wouldn't catch him red-handed anyhow. He's too smart for that. What you want to do is check out his possible stashes — and Marlys's. Now, I know there're no alarms around old man Runyon's place. . . ."

THE SHERIFF came for him at sunset, knocking lightly on the side of the truck until he woke. Fritzy scampered down the steps and started nuzzling at a pocket in her uniform.

"You've got something he wants," the Rehydrator said.

She pulled a dried lizard from the pocket and let it dangle just over Fritzy's nose.

"I see. Come on in. Help yourself to some water."

She climbed in and sat on a folding stool, and covered her cup with a hand when it was half-full. "Too much at once, and my pisspores start sloshing. Thanks."

He gulped two cups in straight succession, trying to purge the dust that seemed to have gathered behind his molars; he poured a bit more into his hands and ran them through his hair until he noticed her wincing. Feeling like a fool, he let them drop to his sides, wondering if it would be more polite to lick them dry. Would he ever be comfortable here?

"I don't suppose you remember anything else about yourself?" she asked. "Anything that might've come back to you in a dream?"

"No more than when I first woke," he said. "I feel like a robot or something, with a few programs missing. I mean, I speak the language, I know some of the routines, but I have no past. I guess those tissue samples you took didn't turn up anything?"

"Nothing yet. It'll take a few days to follow up all the possible records. You've been away twenty years, so chances are whatever's still on file is archived pretty deep. If nothing turns up, then I'd say old Galvin Orlick went to some pains to erase you before he wrung you out."

"Maybe . . . maybe I wanted that. Maybe someone was following me, and that was the only way I could think to escape."

"Or maybe you're a robot, like you said. But I don't think so." She tapped him lightly on his chest. "I heard a heartbeat in there yesterday. And you're not the fugitive type."

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"Sheriff. . . ."

"Why don't you call me Lorna?"

"Lorna, all right. I wish there were something you could call me. 'Rehydrator' sounds like a spare part — which is appropriate. A spare part for something they don't make anymore. I'm obsolete."

"No. You just don't know where you fit in yet. Why don't we give you a name? You came here with all this water — you know, something like that. Waterman. Water. *Walter!*"

"Walter," he repeated, meeting her eyes. "Thank you, Lorna. You're so nice to me. There's nobody . . . nobody close to you around here? You're not married or anything?"

She shook her head. "Gas Lake's a small town, and I'm not from around here. I sort of got into law enforcement through a civil service fluke —turned out I was pretty good at it. But the people here won't exactly open up to me — they keep their distance. You know. They all have secrets I'll probably never know."

He put his hands on hers. "I'm from out of town, too."

"Farther than that. Looking in your eyes, it's like looking down a tunnel into the past."

He let her gaze into that tunnel for a moment, wishing he could see what she saw. Maybe she could find answers to his questions in there.

Suddenly Fritzy started howling.

"Sheriff!" A man's voice, nearby. "Sheriff?"

"My deputy," she said. She went to the canvas and peeked out. "What is it, Skelton?"

"Edgar Runyon's looking for you. Claims he caught Corey Orlick trespassing on his property. He wants us to come out and arrest the kid."

"All right, I'm coming."

She turned back to him, absently slapping the horny toad into her open palm. "Damn that boy. You know what he was after, don't you?"

"His uncle."

She nodded. "Still, it saves me the trouble of coming up with a better excuse for poking around out there. You're welcome to come. It's cooled down quite a bit."

"Be right with you."

When she was outside, he pulled on his sandals, took another swallow of water, and pulled out the gun — the "antique" Lorna had found when she

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searched the truck. As with an unpredictable number of other things, he remembered how it worked. Illegal, she'd said. But he felt like he needed something for himself now. Not knowing his identity, how would he recognize his enemies? The strap fit snug around his ankle.

They found Corey strapped to a chair in an earthen-walled cellar; the only light came from a dim shake-lamp hanging from a hook above the entry. He'd been bound so tightly that his hands were bloodless white. His face was red from trying to shout through his gag.

"Get him out of that chair, Edgar," Lorna said.

"Don't want him slipping away, Sherf," said the hunched, wheezing old man who had led them down the steep dirt steps.

"Right now, or I'll arrest you for human-rights violation. That's sheer torture."

The old man produced a knife and sliced through the clear plastic straps. Lorna undid the gag.

"I didn't do nothing!" Corey spat. "Old geezer — I was just cutting through his property, that's all."

"Stealing prickly pears, he was!" old Runyon said. "I'll beat the crap out of him if I see him round here again.

"Out," Lorna said to Edgar. "Now."

He grumbled, but retreated up the steps. The Rehydrator crouched down and helped work the blood back into Corey's cold fingers. The boy gasped at the pain.

"Not too smart, Corey," Lorna said. "I thought you had more sense."

"I — I wasn't stealing prickly pears."

"I know. You were looking for Galvin."

Corey started to protest, but he didn't have the heart. His head sank forward, and he spoke in a lower tone. "I had to, Sheriff. He's my uncle; he's all I have left in the world — that's what nobody seems to realize."

"We understand, Corey, but you can't go breaking into people's privacy."

"But if you ask to come in, they'll just hide whatever they've got to hide!"

"Well, that's their right. But the truth'll come out, Corey; you have to believe that."

"Why should I?"

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"I know it's frustrating, but . . . but did you see anything?"

He shook his head. "No. He grabbed me too fast. There was a big burlap sack of yucca roots in the corner over there, but he hauled them away."

"Hm. I'll just ask him about that sack. Make him think he's under suspicion. See what we stir up."

They came up out of the hard-baked earth and stood under the stars. Edgar Runyon was waiting for them with a shake-lamp fading in his hands. He shook it vigorously when they appeared, squeezing out the last bit of light. "They're putting you away for a long time, boy!"

"Edgar," Lorna said, "what've you been keeping in that cellar?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"I'm conducting a search of the neighborhood. I could come back with papers, if you like, and extend the search to the rest of your property."

He looked around nervously, scuttling from foot to foot. "It's a root cellar, Sherf. I keep roots down there when I have them."

"Corey says he saw a bundle down there — something about as big as a man wrapped in burlap, which you dragged off."

"That was yucca root, Sherf! I didn't want him messing with it."

"What could he have done, bound and gagged like that? Mind showing me the sack, Edgar?"

He didn't answer for a moment.

"Edgar?"

"All right, all right." Still grumbling, he walked away until he reached another flight of steps carved in the sun-pounded earth. When his head had vanished below the surface, Lorna started swinging her high-power flashlight over the Runyon place, picking out entrances to more burrows, mounds of rusting junk, the glinting mesh of plastic fencing, and beyond all that the rows of Runyon's cactus crops, looming black giants with wicked, spiny arms.

"He is nervous about something," she said. "But I don't think it's here."

Edgar reappeared a moment later, dragging a huge sack. "Here you go." He tossed it down at her feet.

Lorna scarcely glanced at it. "Thanks, Edgar. I shouldn't have bothered you. We'll be taking off now."

"Well, you're very welcome!" he shouted as they strode out the front gate onto the road. "You'd think *I* was the goddamn thief!"

Deputy Skelton was waiting for them on the road, at the wheel of the

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sheriff's buggy. "Why don't you stay here?" Lorna said. "Keep an eye on Edgar tonight. If he goes anywhere, I want to know."

"How'll you get back to town?" he asked.

"We'll walk. It's a nice night for it."

They didn't speak much on the way back. Near Town Hall, Lorna repeated her admonitions to Corey and said good night to Walter.

"Walter?" Corey said.

"That's my name."

"I was wondering."

Corey and Walter walked on. Earl Taws waved from the front of the Miscellany Market, where he was out dusting the feather headdress of his wooden Indian. "My offer still stands on that dog of yours, sir! If he ever dries up again, that is."

"He's not mine to sell," Walter replied. "Thanks anyway."

A moment later they passed the Succulent Steak, and Corey ducked into the restaurant. Walter heard a man's voice raised briefly in anger: "Late again!"

He walked on alone. As he neared his truck, a shadow stepped out from behind it. A woman.

"That your dog in there?" she asked. "He sounds kind of sick."

Walter ran up the steps, hearing a soft whimpering that was even now getting softer. He threw back the canvas flap and saw Fritzy.

Poor Fritzy. The dachshund lay on his side, squirming slowly, creaking with a sound like two pieces of wood rubbed together. His black eyes were dull. The lids closed partially and didn't open again. The tongue was white and dry, receding into the mouth, and the pale gums were lusterless, lacking saliva. He patted the animal, horrified at the feeling — as if he were stroking a piece of scruffy driftwood. Even as he touched him, Fritzy stiffened and apparently died. The last appearance of moisture — the tears in Fritzy's eyes — quickly evaporated.

"I'll be damned," the woman said, having climbed in behind him. It was Marlys Runyon. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it now. You really must have the power to revive things — the lungfish things."

He fell heavily onto his cot, his mind numb with shock.

"Temporary," he muttered. "Only temporary." He found himself squeezing the fat of his wrists for signs of dehydration, for flesh that peaked when pinched like overbeaten egg white.

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"Don't take it so hard," Marlys said, settling next to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. "That poor little thing already lived his natural life. You should be glad you could give him even a few more days."

But he wasn't thinking of Fritzy. He was thinking of himself as he repeated the words, "Only temporary."

"If you're so upset, why not throw on some more of your chemicals and juice him up again?"

"Yes." It was the obvious thing to do, but obvious things weren't occurring to him right now. At any moment he himself might start to dehydrate, might go stiff and wooden like Fritzy — and who would be able to restore him?

He pulled the plastic tub out from under the cot; the black valise sat in it, along with the white plastic mask.

"Let me give you a hand," Marlys said. She reached into the bag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "Are these the instructions?"

He nodded, his fingers trembling as he took various vials from the valise. "Maybe you could read them to me. I don't want to make any mistakes."

She flattened out the instructions while he placed Fritzy in the tub, and read them out to him as he uncapped bottles and poured their contents over Fritzy. She turned away coughing when the fumes rolled up, and went out beating the canvas curtain to clear the air. When she came in again, Fritzy was alive, shivering under Walter's fingers, whimpering. The dachshund jumped down and shook all over; going to the water bowl, he lapped it dry.

"Thank you," Walter finally said, when his own shaking had subsided. "I — I didn't know that could happen."

"Doesn't bode too well for Galvin Orlick, I guess, if you ever do revive him." She shook her head sympathetically. "I'm only glad I was here to help out. Really, I just came to be neighborly. I know I made a bad impression. Corey, you see, he's kind of prejudiced against me on account of his father and I got pretty close after his mother died."

Walter nodded. "Well, he's just a kid. Could I get you anything? Some water?"

"Oh no, no thanks. I've got plenty." She started to back out of the truck. "You look like you might want to be left alone."

"Really, I — I don't mind company. It's just, I don't know many people here."

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"Have you eaten? We've got a good restaurant in town, if you'd like to go over."

"I'd like that," he said, kneeling down to pet Fritzy's damp coat. He did feel grateful for her help. And he had a reason to gain her trust, if he could. She had seen how to use the revival chemicals, and that might be important if . . . if he started to hear his own limbs creaking, if his own eyes dried out. Maybe he could teach Corey and Lorna the process, but in the meantime, Marlys was his only potential savior.

COREY COULDN'T believe it when Walter the Rehydrator came in with Marlys Runyon. They took a corner table. He wanted to rush up and yell at her to get out, but he didn't have the right. Walter seemed simple, but he must know better than to trust her; he must be trying to get information out of her, taking advantage of being a stranger to pretend he didn't know her reputation. All the same, Corey wished he'd warned Walter about her in certain terms, because a guy who walked around without pisspores and relieved himself in sterile dust couldn't be all that smart.

Walter smiled at Corey and waved, but then Mr. Bell called him back into the kitchen. Mr. Bell was in a bad mood, sending him here, sending him there. By the time he next got out of the kitchen, they were already gone. Walter had hardly touched his green fried agave patties.

He was packing scraps of rind into the condenser, when he heard loud voices up front, and suddenly Walter burst into the kitchen. "Corey!"

"What is it? What happened?"

Mr. Bell pushed through the swinging door, glowering at them.

"Mr. Bell, can I—"

"You cannot. You came in late, and you're not half through your shift."

"Law says I still get a lunch break."

"I saw you back here wolfing down prickly pears. If that doesn't count, then—"

"I gotta help my friend."

"Help him on your own time."

"I am. I just quit." Mr. Bell gaped at Corey as he grabbed Walter's hand and hauled him back into the night. "It's Marlys, isn't it? I should've warned you away from her. I thought I had."

"But she's been with me the whole time."

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"What whole time?"

"While we were eating, someone broke into my truck and stole a bunch of water jugs."

"The fact Marlys was with you makes it even more likely it was her doing. She just kept you distracted while her friends went about robbing you."

"She said she — she didn't need water."

"Everybody needs it, Walter. She gets all she can drink from Bannister, who's been sucking it out of my Uncle Orlick's private reserve. But even Bannister'll take more if he can get it."

"Then it could have been anyone, if you're all so damn thirsty."

"Could have, but I know Marlys. She's had you staked out since you first rolled into town, and no one else would dare get in her way. Except maybe me."

They ran to the sheriff's office in Town Hall. The office was empty, but Corey heard voices in the holding cells in back, and the door was ajar. He peered in and saw Deputy Skelton gazing into a cell where some red-faced old geezer was yelling for his lawyer.

"Is the sheriff here?" Corey asked.

Skelton strolled toward him, smiling, and shut the door behind him. "Mescal bum — out-of-towner. He doesn't need a lawyer; he just needs to sleep it off."

"Where is Lorna?" Walter asked.

"She's in the field. What seems to be the matter?"

"Someone broke into my truck and stole some water."

The deputy looked angry. "Now, who'd do a thing like that? Come on. I'll have you fill out a report."

"We know who did it," Corey said. "Marlys set him up. Hey, why aren't you still out there watching Edgar?"

Skelton puffed up with anger. "Are you my boss, kid?"

"We'll fill out that report later," Walter said, taking Corey by the arm before he could answer. "See you, Deputy."

Out in the hall, Walter said, "Where does Lawrence Wing keep his office?"

"Good idea. He's right upstairs."

Wing was in his office, looking consternated. His face darkened further when Corey and Walter appeared. "Corey, I've got some troubling

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news. Fortunately there's an order in place regarding information sharing, or I'd never learn a thing."

"What is it?"

"According to the control devices in your uncle's tomb, he wasn't stolen from his container — he was actively revived. Whether it was a malfunction or the result of tampering, I have no way of knowing right now."

"Revived? You mean he — he's alive?"

"I mean he must've gotten up confused and walked right out of there himself, several days ago."

Corey felt as if he'd been hit on the head. "Walked? Then he's out there someplace!"

"My God." Walter turned even paler than usual. "I know what it was like for me out there, with plenty of water. Can he still be alive?"

"Out in the dunes, wandering around with no water? There's no way . . . no way."

Corey's throat choked up. Walter put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sheriff should know about this," the lawyer said.

"Deputy Skelton wouldn't tell us where she is," Walter said.

"I can radio her direct." Wing went into another room.

"Corey," Walter said, "I want you to come with me before this search gets going. I want to teach you the lungfish remedy."

"Me?"

"I need someone trustworthy to learn it. You see, I'm afraid I — I might dry out myself."

Corey felt a double pang of grief. "You? You mean —"

Walter nodded. "Fritzy and I were dehydrated together by your uncle. I was revived only a few days ago, to come and help Galvin. And I won't have a chance to do that unless I can stay wet. Why don't you come with me and try to keep your hopes up, and I'll tell you everything I know. Maybe Galvin found a cool hole to lie in. Maybe he's got extra water with him. You never know."

"You don't have to cheer me, Walter. I never knew him anyway. If he really is dead, I won't even know what I lost. I think I might just be glad to have all this trouble behind me. If he's dead, I'd just like to know, so I can get on with my own life."

Walter patted his shoulder. "Don't be so gloomy, Corey. Come on."

* * *

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But when they reached the truck, the valise full of chemicals was missing. He hadn't noticed earlier, thanks to the strewn water bottles and other damage the thief had caused.

"What's wrong now?" Corey asked.

"I feel pretty stupid. She really duped me good."

"Marlys? I told you she'd do anything for water."

"That's not all she got. Come on; we'd better hurry."

"Where?"

"Just come on."

They hurried down Main Street, and as they passed the Miscellany Market, he noticed a stray feather lying in the street under a lamp. The wooden Indian was gone, and so was Earl Taws. A CLOSED sign hung on the front door, though it was not yet dawn and seemed too early to shut down.

At Town Hall they went straight to the sheriff's office. This time it was completely deserted. Walter looked through the glass panel into the holding-cell area, but Skelton was nowhere to be seen, and all the cells were empty now.

Out in the hall, they passed Lawrence Wing hurrying down the stairs. "I got word to Lorna," he said. "She'll meet us out at your uncle's burial mound. We can take my buggy."

Two minutes later they drove up from a parking garage into the pre-dawn light. The sky was licorice-colored in the west, but to the east the stars were fading before a rosy front. Wing sped out of town, driving indiscriminately over sage and cactus patches, ignoring the roads. Walter held on for his life, trying to spot familiar landmarks in the paling world.

"Where's the lake?" he asked Corey.

"Over there," Corey said, pointing off to the right. "But in the buggy you don't have to worry about thistles and sand, so it's faster to cut around through the hills."

Walter leaned over to shout in Wing's ear: "Cut over to the lake!"

"But Lorna's at the tomb."

"We'll take the long way round to meet her. Just go past the lake."

Wing cut sharply to the right. Minutes later Walter saw the flush of shimmering liquid ahead of them. The sky was a watercolor dream, and Gasoline Lake looked like the bowl in which some heavenly painter had rinsed those brushes. He remembered how he had nearly thrown himself

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in at first sight. Now, looking at it, the thought was about as appealing as a swim in paint thinner.

Still, this was a thirsty, thirsty world, and the lake was the most likely lure for a thirsty man who didn't know better.

Or rather, the most likely place for such a man to be *found.*

Walter didn't believe that Galvin Orlick had been traveling under his own power.

He was remembering, from some past existence, that wooden Indians didn't wear real feathers.

"Stop here," he shouted just before they got down to the beach. "Let it coast — we need silence."

The lawyer cut the motor, and they glided out onto the strand, plaques of parched mud snapping under the tires. By the pale orange light, he scanned the beach from shore to shore. Suddenly Corey's arm swung up. "There."

A cluster of dark specks were massed on the far shore, below the brink of a dune that glowed like a mound of orange sherbet. Walter's mouth watered at the memory. "Go!"

The motor kicked on, and they swung around the lake. He kept his eyes fixed on the specks as they drew closer, resolving into figures, some vaguely recognizable. Suddenly the people started to scatter. There were more than he'd thought at first, more than he would have believed. As the buggy took the curve of the shore, he saw another coming around Gasoline Lake from the direction of the burial mound with its tall, lonely plastic oak.

"That's the sheriff!" Corey said. "See, she's cutting them off. Who are they?"

"The question is," said Lawrence Wing, "who *aren't* they?"

People scattered, trapped between the cars, but there really wasn't anywhere for them to go. A few scrambled up the side of the dune, but that was fruitless, for as much progress as one made, another would set off an avalanche and bring them all back to the bottom again and again. Most of the others ran into the lake and stopped before they'd gotten very far, as if their skin was already burning; they looked dizzied by the fumes.

The buggies hemmed them in. Lawrence stopped and hopped out carrying a long, sleek weapon, something like a shotgun loaded with darts. "Don't strike any sparks around here," he cautioned Walter.

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On the other side of the group, Lorna picked up a megaphone and ordered everyone to stay where they were, including those in the lake. Walter recognized Deputy Skelton, Norris Culp, Earl Taws, Edgar Runyon, and Corey's boss, all out in the shining tide, all looking mortified at having been caught.

Walter and Corey walked to the water's edge.

A man lay sprawled facedown on the baked mud, his fingers splayed, the collar and shoulders of his suit rumpled and torn by clutching fingers. His hair and shirt were soaking wet, shimmering with the vapors of Gasoline Lake. For a moment, Walter thought they were too late, that he was already dead — again or for the first time. Then his body spasmed weakly, and he started to cough.

They turned the man over. Walter pulled off his Mylar hat to shade the man's red face. He'd seen him earlier that night, shouting for his lawyer in the holding cell. Apparently he'd gotten his wish. Medford Bannister stood just offshore, wearing a defiant expression, up to his ankles in Gasoline Lake.

"It's him, isn't it?" Lorna said, walking up to them.

"I don't know," Walter admitted.

But Corey was nodding. "Same as his pictures, it's him. Uncle Galvin?"

The old man sputtered and opened his eyes. "That — *that's* my name! I've been trying to remember! What the hell's going on here? You here to help me, or you in with the rest of them?"

"I'm your nephew. I wouldn't dream of hurting you. You've been asleep for twenty years."

Galvin sat up. He didn't look quite so old anymore, though he was obviously worn-out by what he'd been through in the past few hours.

"Twenty years? And the drought's over? It sure doesn't look like it's over. Twenty years, and you woke me up for this? To be dragged around in the night and have my head stuck in turpentine? Jesus, my eyes burn like hell."

Corey opened the spigot of his pisspores and let recycled water drain into his palms. He splashed it into Galvin's eyes, without much apparent effect.

"Let's get him back to town," Lorna said. "Mr. Orlick, I'm the sheriff of Gas Lake. I've got some questions for you."

"Sheriff? Where's my damn lawyer? — that's what I'd like to know."

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She lifted her gun to point at Medford Bannister, who smiled sheepishly and shrugged.

"Him? But he was the main one trying to drown me! All I remember is, I came awake in what I think was a jail cell, some woman pouring chemicals all over me, and the next thing, I'm hustled off here with everybody trying to kill me."

Marlys, the Rehydrator thought. Marlys had stolen his chemicals and revived Galvin. He suddenly remembered what the sheriff had said once — that Marlys knew how to dehydrate things. *She* must have dried out Fritzy, in order to learn how to rehydrate him. The process didn't reverse itself naturally after all. A sense of relief nearly flattened him.

Corey said, "They wanted to make it look like you woke up on your own and staggered over here for a drink and died in the lake. That way they could solve the problem of whether you were alive or not once and for all, and make it look like an accident — your own fault."

"Galvin," Lawrence Wing said, coming down to the water's edge, "I think you'll need another lawyer now."

"Jesus Christ, Larry, is that you?" Galvin said. "You look like shit! How old are you?"

"Almost your age now, Galvin. You shouldn't speak till you've looked in a mirror. Come on; we'll give you a hand."

Walter bent over to help them lift the old man, and as he did, he felt something brush his calf under his robes. He realized too late what it was.

"Drop the old buzzard," said Medford Bannister. "Drop him, and then nobody move."

They let Galvin down gently. Walter turned around and saw Bannister standing in the shallows with his old gun. It was pointed right at Lorna.

"Skelton," he said, "get over there and take the sheriff's gun."

"I don't know," the deputy started to protest in a shamed, whining voice.

"Come on; they can't outnumber us. We'll take care of them and no one'll ever know better. We all know how to keep a secret, don't we?"

He grinned. The mass of townspeople out in the lake began moving slowly toward shore, confident now. Walter started to back off, but the gun in Medford's hand swung toward him, the hammer cocked back to strike. He stopped where he was and put up his hands.

"I built this town," Galvin Orlick growled.

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"It belongs to me now," Medford said.

Out of the corner of Walter's eye, he saw Corey moving, hidden behind Lawrence Wing. The boy slowly took the lawyer's gun and raised it with the barrel between Wing's body and arm, nestled in his armpit. His finger trembled on the trigger, ready to fire, when someone on the lake spied him, and a shout of warning went out to Bannister.

Medford Bannister whirled and fired, and that was the last they saw of him.

As the hammer fell, it struck a spark. Not only the gunpowder charge, but the whole lake, exploded.

A roiling ball of flame licked up from the shores, boiling back into the heart of the lake, exploding inward and outward at the same time. The sound was beyond deafening; it was a solid impact to which every bone in Walter's body responded like a tympanum. The force of the blast hurled him over the mud and into the dune, where he lay covered in sand until the heat of the burning lake subsided, and the heat of the sun took its place.

He wiped sand from his eyes and looked over the shore, marveling at the blackened bowl where the lake had lain.

Wisps of fire still clung to a sunken plain of what looked like charred and tarry melted rubber. The foul smoke was visibly clearing, but he felt as if the reek of burning might never leave his nostrils.

He saw a few more survivors likewise coming to their senses on the bank of sand. Lorna and Corey and Lawrence Wing lay tumbled about. A few other townsfolk lay staring in horror at the lake where their conspirators had perished.

Galvin Orlick stood up, stretched, and began cursing methodically. "My kind of town," he said, and shook his head.

THERE I lay," Corey's uncle said, with a wistfulness turned instantly bitter. "And not long enough by far." He aimed a toe at one of the meters on his headstone. Liquid crystal spurted over his shoe. Galvin crouched and fondly patted Fritzy's head. The dachshund seemed to remember him.

"Well, son, let's get going. I'm not crazy about this place, and there's a wind coming up."

"A big one," Corey agreed. "Gonna be shoveling sand tomorrow."

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Corey had use of a police buggy, now that the force consisted of Sheriff Lorna alone. She had offered to make him a deputy.

"I wish I could help that friend of yours," Uncle Galvin confided as they drove back. The road wavered under waves of sand. "My own memories are as spotty as his, I'm afraid. Still, I'm glad to see I've got some money to help him out with his search. What about you, Corey? What are your plans? You going to stay around and help me rebuild Gas Lake?"

"I don't know, Uncle Galvin. Are you sure you wouldn't just like to junk the place and start over?"

Galvin shook his head. "I don't know, son. I don't know what to do. I don't feel fully awake yet, and damn if these pisspores aren't the most uncomfortable things I've ever worn. I'm having trouble concentrating on anything except how to keep them from chafing."

"You'll get calluses, Uncle; don't worry. You're not . . . not thinking of going back to sleep, are you?"

"Sleep? Are you nuts? The way I woke up, I'm afraid to so much as take a nap."

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Walter sat in Lorna's office and watched the sunset through the double-paned windows. She came in after a few minutes, holding a folded-up piece of plastic computer printout. Her expression was pretty mixed.

"You've got something, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded, biting her lip. "It's an address in California. A place you used to get mail. I suppose you'll be going there right away."

He nodded, taking the plastic, but not yet looking at it. "Lorna, why stay on here? Gas Lake's a ghost town now. Does it really need a sheriff?"

She smiled sadly, walked to the window, and stood there for a minute staring down at the empty streets filling with sand, at lights that wouldn't come on tonight. Power was off everywhere, and it would stay off; none of the public utilities were operational because there was no one to operate them. The streets were filling with sand, buildings erased in the grainy wind, like a vision of what Gas Lake was soon to become.

"Lorna?"

He saw her fingers fumbling at her breast; they came away with her badge. She looked at it for a moment, then set it down on the windowsill. "When were you thinking of leaving?" she said.

* * *

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When Marlys woke, the house was dark. She scrambled out of Medford's bed and moved through the house, touching switches, shouting commands to the voice controls, but all to no effect. The power was out, and where was Medford? She had waited all day for news, figuring he was busy with the culmination of their plans. He hadn't wanted her involved in the final action — everyone else must contribute, since they all expected a share of Galvin's water, but Marlys had done enough. He was a cautious man, Medford. He left nothing to chance. She had to trust that he'd get back soon — before dawn, at least. What time was it, anyway?

She glanced at her watch, then stared at it.

The time was twelve noon.

She went to a window and opened the blinds, and saw nothing outside but darkness.

Solid darkness.

Leaning very close, she realized exactly how solid it was. Trillions of tiny grains pressed right up against the glass.

Marlys backed away with a scream barely held in her throat. Why hadn't the blowers gone on? Because the power was out, she told herself. But why was the power out?

She hurried to the back door, punched for it to open, but none of the controls were working. She opened the panel for manual operation, and quickly spun the knobs.

The door opened inward, letting a sliding river of sand stream into the porch room. She tried to force it shut, but the sand kept pouring in, unstoppable. She backed out of there, closed the inner door, and went into the kitchen to try the phonescreen. It didn't respond. Nothing responded.

She gnawed her baccorish three times faster than usual, as if it would help her to think. She had to stay calm. Panic was dangerous in a situation like this.

All right. She was buried. But Medford kept plenty of water and plenty of food in the cellar; she could survive a long time if she had to. With the case of revival chemicals, she could rehydrate Medford's entire collection of horny toads and eat them fresh. Yes, if something had gone wrong and Medford didn't come looking for her and the power never came on again, she could live under the dunes — possibly for years. And one day the wind would clear the sand away for just a moment. She would wake to find a thin light trickling through the windows, a hint of sunlight visible through

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the sand; ever vigilant for this opportunity, she would shatter the glass and climb to the surface and escape.

Someday all that might happen, yes. It was the best scenario she could imagine at the moment. There were plenty of worse ones.

She spat a mouthful of tobacco juice right on Medford's polished real-wood floor. Let him come and wipe it up. She sucked up another few inches of tobacco, chewing furiously, and tried not to think about what might happen when she ran out of rope.

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Coming Attractions

WE GAVE you extra reading material in this anniversary issue — so take your time and enjoy. Our next issue, dated December, will hit the stands on October 29 and arrive in your mailbox just before that date. When next month rolls around, and F&SF isn't in its usual place in your mailbox, remember the handful of stories you were going to get to later, pick that extra-thick issue off the coffee table, and finish all 240 pages.

By the time you're done, December's issue will be on its way.

And what a wonderful issue it will be. The cover has a beautiful painting illustrating **Dean Whitlock's** "The Man Who Loved Kites." The story is a change of pace for Dean, a lovely tale set in a mythical Asia — where kitemakers fight wars, and where love is as eternal as the wind.

John Morressy returns with another of his offbeat fantasy stories, this one a "Tale of Three Wizards." Never one to make fantasy seem commonplace, John takes the wizards, adds a bit of magic, and helps us to see ourselves even more clearly.

Finally, hot new writer — one of this year's Nebula nominees — **Ian R. MacLeod** debuts in these pages with his haunting science fiction story, "The Perfect Stranger." Imagine the perfect vacation, with the lover of your dreams, in a place you have never seen before — or have you?

And, gazing into 1992 (sounds ominous, huh? Another new year . . .), we'll have cover stories by **Rob Chilson, Grania Davis,** and **Pat Murphy. John Brunner, Vance Aandahl,** and **Edward Bryant** return with some of their best work yet. Vampire novelist extraordinaire, **Chelsea Quinn Yarbro,** will appear in these pages for the first time with a stunningly wry novella about, of all things, the IRS.

So savour this anniversary issue, but remember that December is just around the corner, filled with 160 pages of the best short fiction in the genre.

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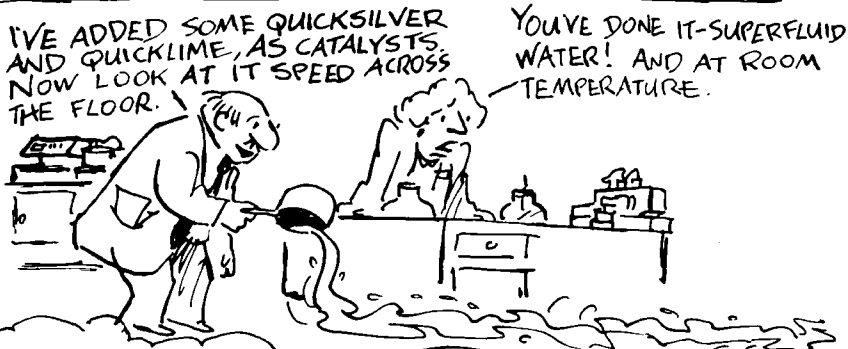
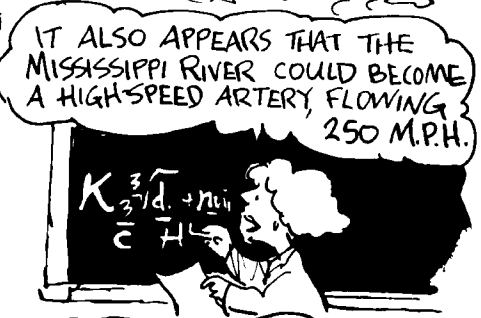

I'VE ADDED SOME QUICKSILVER AND QUICKLIME, AS CATALYSTS. NOW LOOK AT IT SPEED ACROSS THE FLOOR.
YOU'VE DONE IT-SUPERFLUID WATER! AND AT ROOM TEMPERATURE.



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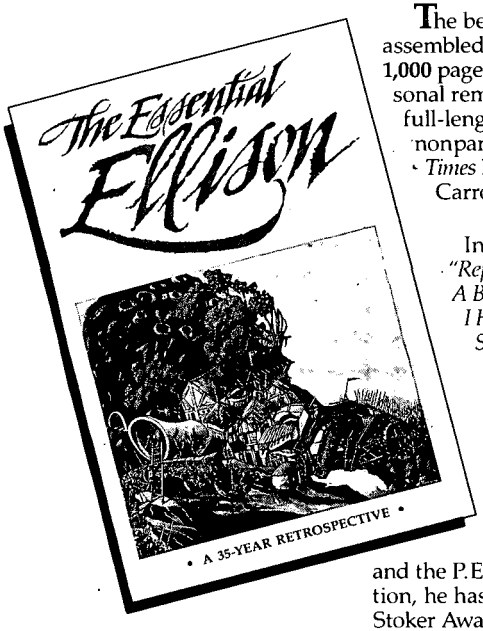

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Hardcover: $34.95
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ISBN: 0-9623447-4-5

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